

GREAT SCIENCE FICTION

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JAMES H. SCHMITZ

ROBERT SILVERBERG

STEPHEN BARTHOLOMEW

ROBERT YOUNG

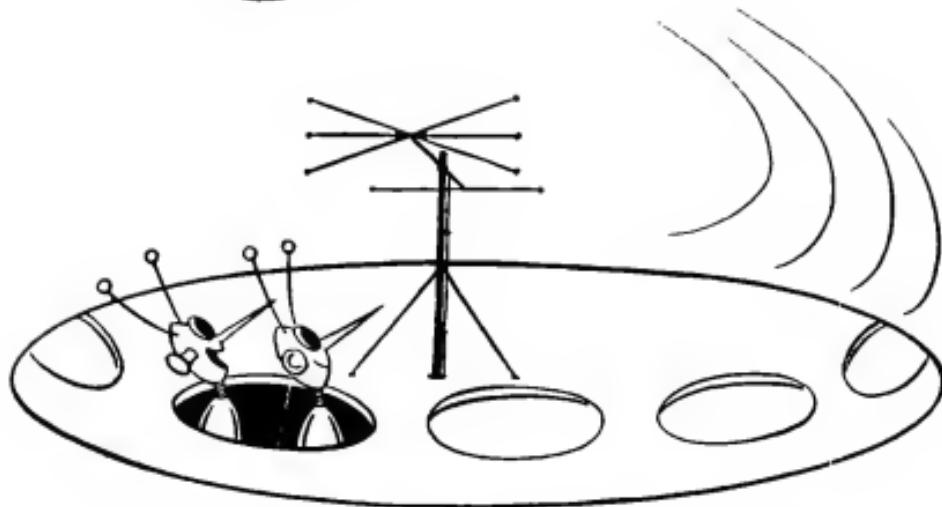
GERALD VANCE

O. H. LESLIE

JACK DOUGLAS

ELLIS HART





"It must do something; all earth people have them."

Klein's Basement



"The Galactic wars were nothing like this!"

GREAT SCIENCE FICTION

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***Men were tortured . . . men were killed . . . and the Earth
Scientists chatted pleasantly with the Tareeg. Were
they traitors or were they waiting for The Ice Men?***

LEFT HAND,

JERRY NEWLAND was sitting up on the side of his bunk, frowning at the floor, when Troy Gordon came quietly into the room and stopped at the entrance to watch him. Not too good, Troy thought after a moment, studying Newland's loose mouth, the slow blinking of the eyes and the slumped immobility of position. Not too bad either—not for a man who, in most practical respects, had been dead for the better part of three years and come awake again only the day before.

But the question was whether

Newland was going to recover quickly enough now to be of any use as an ally.

Troy moved forward a few steps into the room, stopped again as Newland raised his head in a sluggish motion to stare at him. For a few seconds, the man's face remained blank. Then he grinned. A strained, unpleasant-looking grin, but a grin.

Troy waited. Newland cleared his throat, said, "I . . . I recognized you almost immediately this time! And . . . I remembered that this same thing had happened before."

Illustrated by SCHELLING

RIGHT HAND

Troy grinned, too, guardedly. "My coming into the room this way?"

Newland nodded.

"It happened yesterday," Troy said. "What's my name?"

"Troy Gordon."

"And yours?"

"Jerry Franklin Newland."

"What do you do?"

"Do? . . . Oh!" Newland drew a deep breath. "I'm courier pilot for the . . . for the . . ." He stopped, looking first surprised, then dismayed. Then his face wrinkled up slowly, like that of a child about to cry.

"That part's gone again, eh?" Troy asked, watching him.

"Yes. There's some . . . there's . . ."

"You are—or you were—courier pilot for the Cassa Expedition," Troy said. He thumped his heel on the floor. "That's Cassa One, underneath us. We've been away from Earth for three years and eight months." He paused. "Does that help?"

Newland reflected, frowned. "Not much. I . . . it seems to be true when you say it." He hesitated. "We're prisoners, aren't we?"

"Uh-huh." he answered, flatly.

"I had that feeling. And you're biding me here?"

"That's right," Troy agreed.

"Why?"

"Because nobody else knows you're still alive. It's better if they don't, right now."

Newland shook his head, indicated a sign fastened to the ceiling above the bunk in such a way that a man lying in the bunk on his back would catch sight of it as soon as he opened his eyes. "That," he said, "made sense as soon as I saw it just now! I remembered having read it before and what it meant. But otherwise everything's still badly blurred."

ROY glanced up at the sign. It read:

RELAX AND TAKE IT EASY, JERRY! YOU WERE IN A BAD SMASH-UP, AND YOU'VE JUST FINISHED A LONG STRETCH IN THE EMERGENCY TANK OF YOUR SHIP. EVERYTHING'S BOUND TO SEEM A LITTLE FOGGY, BUT YOU'RE GOING TO BE OKAY. DON'T TRY TO LEAVE THE ROOM. IT HAS TO BE KEPT LOCKED, BUT SOMEONE WILL BE ALONG TO SEE YOU IN TWO OR THREE HOURS AT THE MOST.

Troy said, "Your memory will start coming back fast enough. You've made a good start." He sat down, took his cigarette case from his pocket. "I'll go over some of the things that have

happened with you. That tends to bring them . . . and other things . . . back to mind. Care to smoke?"

"Yes, I'd like to smoke."

Troy tossed the cigarette case over to the bunk, watched the pilot reach for and miss it, then bend forward awkwardly to fumble for it on the floor. Reflexes still very bad, he thought. But when Newland had the case in his hand, he flicked it open without hesitation, took out a cigarette and closed the case, then turned it over and pressed the button which snapped on the concealed light. The day before, he had stared at the case helplessly until Troy showed him what to do. So his body had begun to recall more of its learned motion patterns.

Troy said, "I told you the main parts twice yesterday. Don't let that worry you . . . you've retained more than most would be likely to do after a quarter of the time you spent in the tank. You weren't in very good shape after the smash-up, Jerry!"

Newland said wryly, "I can imagine that." He drew on the cigarette, coughed, then tossed the case back to Troy who caught it and put it in his pocket.

"Have you got back any recollection at all of what the aliens that caught us are like?" Troy asked.

Newland shook his head.

"Well," Troy said, "they're downright cute, in a way. More like big penguins than anything else. Short little legs. The heads aren't so cute . . . a hammerhead shark would be the closest thing there, which is why we call them Hammerheads — though not when we think some of them might be listening.

"They don't belong here any more than we do. They came from another system which is a lot closer than Sol but still a long way off. Now, we aren't the first Earth people to get to Cassa. There was an Earth survey ship poking around the system about twenty years ago, and it seems that the Hammerheads also had an expedition here at the time. They spotted our survey ship but weren't spotted themselves, and the survey ship eventually went back to Earth short two of its men. Those two were supposed to have got lost in the deserts on Cassa. Actually, the Hammerheads picked them up . . . Jerry?"

The pilot's head was beginning to nod. He straightened now and took a puff on the cigarette, grinning embarrassedly. "S'all right, Troy!" he muttered. "Seemed to get . . . sort of absent minded there for a moment."

Which was, Troy knew, one of the symptoms of the re-awakening period. Newland's mind had

been shut away from reality for a long time, wrapped in soothing, vaguely pleasant dreams while the emergency tank went about the business of repairing his broken body. The habit of unconscious retreat from his surroundings could not be immediately discarded, and particularly not when the surroundings were as undesirable as those in which Newland now found himself. It would be better, Troy thought, to skip some of the uglier details . . . and yet he had to tell the man enough to make him willing to cooperate in what would be, at the very least, a desperately dangerous undertaking.

HE said, "You're still only three-quarters awake, Jerry. We have to expect that. But the closer you listen and the more information you can absorb, the faster you'll shake off the cobwebs. And that's important. These Hammerheads are a tough breed, and we're in a bad spot."

Newland nodded. "I understand that much. Go ahead."

"Well," Troy said, "whatever that first Earth survey ship had to report about the Cassa system looked good enough so that the administration put Cassa down for a major expedition some day. Twenty years later, we got here again—the interstellar exploration carrier *Atlas* with eight hundred men on board. I'm one



of her engineers. And we found the Tareegs—that's what the Hammerheads call themselves—waiting for us. Not another bunch of scientists and assistants but a war-party. They'd learned enough from the two survey ship men they'd caught to figure out we'd be coming back and how to handle us when we got here.

"Now get straight on a few things about the Hammerheads, Jerry. Their weapons systems are as good or better than ours.

In other ways, they're behind us. They've got a fair interstellar drive but can't make the same use of it we do, because they've still a lot to learn about inertial shielding. They have a couple of robot-directed interstellar drones standing in a hangar a few hundred yards from here which can hit half the speed of your courier, but no Hammerhead or human being could ride 'em up and live. The two big carriers that brought them to Cassa One are dead-slow boats compared to the



LEFT HAND, RIGHT HAND

Atlas. And that's about the best they have at present.

"Just the same, they're out to get us. War is the best part of living as far as they're concerned, and they're plenty good at it. So far they've only been fighting among themselves but they're itching for a chance at another race, and now we're it. Capturing an Earth expedition in the Cassa System was only part of the plan to take Earth by surprise."

Newland blinked, said slowly, "How's that? You'd think that might tip their hand. We'll be missed, won't we?"

"Sure we'll be missed," Troy said. "But when? We were to stay here eight years . . . don't remember that either, eh? The Hammerheads will have all the time they need to be set for who ever comes looking for us eventually."

"But would they know that?"

Troy said bitterly, "They know everything about Earth that our top brass scientists of the Cassa Expedition were able to tell them. Pearson and Andrews—those names mean anything? They were the Expedition Chiefs when we were captured. One of the first things the Hammerheads did was to have the science staff and other department heads look on while they tortured those two men to death. As a result, they've had all the cooneration

they could ask for—more than any decent human being would think of giving them—from our present leadership, the senior scientists Dr. Chris Dexter and Dr. Victor Clingman. They're a couple of lousy traitors, Jerry, and I'm not sure they're even capable of realizing it. Clingman's in charge here at the ground base, and he acts as if he doesn't see anything wrong in helping the Hammerheads."

"Helping the . . ." Vacancy showed for a moment in the pilot's expression; he frowned uncertainly.

TRY to stay awake, Jerry! There're just a few other things you should try to get nailed down in your memory this time. The Hammerheads are water animals. They can waddle around on land as long as they keep themselves moist, but they don't like it. They've got a religion based on a universal struggle between water and land. Cassa One's nothing but hot desert and rock and big salt beds, so it's no good to them. And the other two planets in the system have no oxygen to speak of.

"Now here's the thing that's hard to swallow. There's a huge lumped-up asteroid swarm in the system. The *Atlas* stopped for a few days on the way in to look around in it. Dexter and Clingman, after we'd been captured,

volunteered the information to the Hammerheads that a lot of that stuff was solid H₂O and that if they wanted Cassa One fixed up the way they'd like it—wet—the *Atlas* could ferry enough asteroid ice over here in billion-ton loads to turn most of the surface of the planet into a sea.

"You understand it wasn't the Hammerheads who had the idea. They don't have anything resembling the ship power and equipment to handle such a job; it hadn't even occurred to them that it could be possible. But you can bet they bought it when it was handed to them. It will give them a base a third of the way between their own system and Sol. That's what's been going on since we landed and were grabbed off . . . almost three years ago now.

"And these last weeks there've been, for the first time since we got here, a few clouds in the sky. It means the boys on the *Atlas* have as many of those mountains of ice riding on orbit as are needed, and they've started shoving them down into the atmosphere to break up and melt. So we . . . Jerry, wake up!"

Troy Gordon paused, watching Newland, then shrugged, stood up and went over to take the butt of the cigarette from the pilot's slack fingers. Newland had slid back into catatonic immobility; he offered no resistance as Troy

swung his legs up on the bunk and straightened him out on his back.

How much would he remember the next time he awoke? Troy didn't know; he had no medical experience and was working on the basis of remembered scraps of information about the treatment given men recovering from an experience such as Newland's. There were people on the ground station who could have told him what to do, but he hadn't dared ask questions.

It was chiefly a matter of time now. Or of lack of time. What would happen when the giant hauling operation was concluded, when the water which had been carried in from space came creeping across the vast desert plateaus about the station, was something he didn't know. But it was almost certain that if his own plans hadn't been carried out by that time, they never would be.

JERRY," he addressed the sleeping pilot softly, "if you've wondered why I'm risking my neck to bring you back to life and keep you hidden away from the Hammerheads and Clingman, it's because you're the one man I still can trust in this lousy expeditionary group. It's because you tried to do something about the situation on your own. You don't remember it yet, but when the

Hammerheads took over the *Atlas* you made a break for it in the courier boat. You tried to get away and warn Earth. They shot you down before you could clear atmosphere; but then they couldn't find the wreck. They thought it was down in one of the salt beds and gave up looking for it.

"But I found it in the desert a couple of months later. You'd dropped through into the emergency tank and you were still more or less alive. I smuggled the tank into the station here as soon as I'd rigged up a place where I could keep it. I can use some help, and you'll be the best possible man for the job. . . ."

He stopped, surprised to see that Newland's mouth had begun to work awkwardly as if he were trying to speak. Then a few words came, slow and slurred, but indicating that the pilot's mind had not sunk nearly as far from full wakefulness as during his previous relapses.

"Wha . . . want me . . . do?"

Troy didn't answer. Not yet, he thought. Not until Newland was no longer helpless. Because, in spite of all precautions, he might be discovered here at any hour; and if that should happen, Troy's secret must still be his own. He could act without Newland's help if necessary.

He waited a few seconds longer, while the pilot's face slowly smoothed out again into coma-

tose blankness. Then Troy turned around quietly and left the room.

* * *

Troy Gordon's personal living quarters were on the lowest of the station's three underground levels, behind the central power plant and utilities section. Considerable privacy was their only attraction; and since the arrangement kept Troy, during his off-duty hours, close to his responsibilities as the station's maintenance engineer, neither Dr. Clingman nor the Hammerheads had objected to it. He was a useful man; and to the useful, minor privileges could be extended.

Troy had been able to take advantage of that circumstance. The room in which Newland was hidden lay behind his own quarters, forming an extension to them. The entrance to it was concealed, and while a careful search should have disclosed it, Troy—so far as he knew—had as yet given no one a reason to initiate such a search. The back room was not part of the station's original design; he had cut it secretly out of the rock. With the equipment at his disposal, it had been a relatively minor job.

But it involved a very ugly risk. Discovery would have meant death, and no easy one. With the exception of the cooperating chief scientists, the Ham-

merheads' attitude towards their captives was largely one of watchful indifference, so long as no one got out of line. But they had taken one measure which insured that, after a short time, there was very little inclination left among the prisoners to get out of line knowingly. At intervals of about a month, whether or not an overt offense had been committed, one more member of Earth's Cassa Expedition was methodically tortured to death by the aliens; and a group of his fellows, selected apparently at random, was obliged to witness the matter while fastened to a device which allowed them to experience the victim's sensations in modified form.

Troy had been included twice in the observing group. He hadn't known whether it implied a personal warning or not. In the Hammerheads' eyes, he was a useful servant; it might be that he was also a suspected one. Nevertheless, it had been necessary to construct the back room. One day, he was returning through the desert from one of the outlying automatic stations under his care when he caught the momentary whisper of a distress signal in his groundcar's receiver. The slight sound had put his hair on end. It was an Earth signal, on an Earth band; and with the *Atlas* off-planet it could have only one possible source. In seconds, it

wavered out and was lost, but Troy already had established the direction.

A WEEK passed before he had the opportunity to obtain a second fix; then, hours later, he was standing beside the wreck of the courier ship. It had plunged into a deep cleft in the rocks and was now half covered by sand; it began to seem less of a miracle that the Hammerhead fliers had not found it. Troy shut off the quavering signal projector, discovered next that the emergency tank had a living occupant, but left Newland where he was while he hurriedly examined the rest of the ship. The courier was hopelessly damaged, but before Troy concluded the examination, his plan against the Hammerheads had been born, at least as a possibility. It took more than two and a half years then to convert the possibility into an operation; which seemed at last to have something better than a fighting chance to succeed. For, of course, Troy had told no one of the discovery. A few words might have gained him eager helpers, but might also have reached a man paralyzed by the fear of torture to the extent that he would reveal everything to safeguard himself.

Troy left his rooms, locking the outer door behind him. Moving thirty feet down the narrow

steel-floored passage behind the power plant, he entered one of the tool rooms, again closing and locking the door as he went through. It had been a much more difficult and lengthy undertaking to drill a tunnel from the station's lowest level up to the force-screened Hammerhead hangar outside than to carve an additional room out of the rock, but it had been completed months before. The tunnel's hidden station entrance was beneath the tool room floor, the other opening out of the polished rock base of the hangar twenty feet from one of the interstellar drones. The most careful human scrutiny would hardly have read any significance there into the hairline crack which formed an irregular oval on the rock; and since Troy hadn't been found out, he could assume that the Hammerheads' powers of observation were no more acute.

It had been night in the surrounding desert for some hours by now, but the hangar was brightly lit—a very unusual occurrence at such a time. Troy paused, momentarily disconcerted, studying the scene in the hangar through the vision screen installed in the tunnel just below the exit. If the Hammerheads—there were only Hammerheads—present—were initiating some major new activity in the next day or two, his plans might be,

if not ruined, at least very dangerously delayed. He counted over a hundred of the creatures, mostly assembled near the far end of the hangar in three orderly groups. A few officers stood together, somewhat closer to him.

Troy chewed his lip anxiously, the moisture-conserving suits they wore for outside duty on Cassa One, which concealed the two sets of swim flippers along their sides and left the top pair of upper limbs . . . short, sturdy brown arms with hands larger than human hands, quite as capable and rather unpleasantly human in appearance . . . free for use. The transparent, inverted-triangle helmets were clamped down. As he looked on, one of their big atmospheric personnel carriers came gliding into sight behind the immobile ranks. There were commands, and the Tareegs turned and filed into the vehicle, moving with the rapid, awkward little waddle which was their method of progress on land. A minute or two later, the loaded carrier moved out of the hangar, and the lights in the vast structure slowly faded away.

WHERE were they going? They were carrying the usual weapons, but this was not some dryland drill. Troy could not remember seeing so large a group leave the station before. The uneasy conviction returned

that the move must be connected with the fact that clouds had begun to show in Cassa One's skies, that the mile-thick boulders of ice which had been brought across space already were falling through the atmosphere of the dessicated world.

One or two more undisturbed days, Troy thought. In that time it would become clear whether Newland was going to recover sufficiently to be able to play a part in his plans. Only two sections of the shattered courier ship, the inertial shielding and the autonav, had been needed to transform the Hammerheads' interstellar drone twenty feet from the tunnel exit into a spaceship which men could ride and direct. Both those sections had been repairable, and everything else Troy had been able to steal or build in the station. Month after month passed as he brought it all together in the tunnel, familiarized himself with every necessary detail of the drones mechanisms and fitted in the new installations . . . first in theory, then in actual fact. A part of almost every night was spent in the darkened hangar, assembling, checking and testing one section or another, then disassembling everything and taking it back down into the tunnel before the moment came when the Tareeg watch-beams would sweep again through the hangar.

The beam-search was repeated each three hours and twenty-seven minutes throughout the night. Within that period of time, Troy would have to carry out a final complete assembly, let the drone roar into life and send it flashing up through the force-screen and into space.

By now, he knew he could do it. And if he had calculated the drone's capacity correctly, he would then be less than six months from Earth. The Hammerheads had nothing they could send after him.

But once in space, he needed Newland's experience. Everything else would be on board to get them to Earth, but without a trained pilot the probability of arriving only on autonav was something Troy couldn't calculate. With a great deal of luck, he thought, it still should be possible. Newland's skills, on the other hand, would give them something considerably better than an even chance.

But Newland would have to be recovered first. He was still under the ministrations of the emergency tank, embedded now in the wall of the back room beyond the bunk. The tank had to stay there; no amount of planning had shown a way it could be fitted into the drone besides everything else; there simply was no room left for it. And what Troy had learned made it clear

that if he lifted into space with Newland before the pilot's behavior was very nearly normal, he would have a half-dead zombie on his hands before the trip was well begun.

That had been his reason for waiting. But the question was now whether he mightn't already have waited a little too long. . . .

ROY checked his watch. Take a chance and begin the final installation at once? It would be an hour before the search-beams came back. The interior of the ships was inspected at irregular periods; he hadn't been able to establish any pattern for that. But to leave his equipment in place in the drone for one day, or two at the most, might not be stretching his luck too far. Then, if Newland shaped up, there would be that much less delay in leaving, that much less time to spend in the Tareeg hangar finishing the job at the end. And no one could tell what new developments the next few days might bring, or how much time they would find that they had left. . . .

He twisted the direction dials on the vision screen, swinging it slowly once more about the darkened hangar. Then he unlocked and shifted the exit switch, and the irregularly carved section of rock above him moved on its lifting rods out of the hangar floor.

Troy swung up and out behind it, got to his feet and started over to the drone.

There was a thin, burring noise close to his ear.

Troy stopped in mid-stride, his face tight and wary. The noise meant that his room communicator was being called. Probably some minor technical emergency on the station, but . . . He counted off twenty seconds, then turned on the relay mike under his coat collar. Trying to make his voice thick with drowsiness, he said, "Gordon speaking. Who's it?"

"Reese," a carefully uninflexed voice told him from the speaker. "Dr. Clingman wants you to come up to his office immediately, Gordon."

Troy felt a sudden sharp prickling of fear.

"At this time of night?" he demanded petulantly. "It's the middle of my sleep period! What's gone wrong now?"

"I wouldn't know," Reese said. "Our senior scientist"—he made the two words sound like a worn, habitual curse—"didn't go into details."

* * *

Dr. Victor Clingman was a large, untidy man inclined to plumpness, with stringy blond hair and protuberant pale eyes. His office adjoined that of the Tareeg station commandant—a Low Dsala, in Hammerhead

terms—and it was permeated from there with a slightly salty, vaguely perfumed moistness. Rank had its privileges; only the Low Dsala enjoyed the luxury of keeping his station work quarters damp enough to make the wearing of a suit unnecessary. The other Hammerheads waddled about the cold, dry halls completely covered, breathing through humidifiers, and were only occasionally permitted, and then after much ceremony, to enter an area in their section called the Water Room and linger there for several hours.

Troy came into Clingman's office with his tool kit through the double doors designed to prevent moisture from escaping, shivering slightly as the sudden clamminess touched his skin. Clingman, engaged as usual in pecking out something on a writer, shirt sleeves rolled up on his plump arms, ranked piles of notes on the table beside him, turned a pale, unhealthy-looking face towards the door.

"Mister Gordon," he said mildly, dragging the "mister" out a little as was his habit. He nodded at the wall to Troy's left. "Our recording mechanisms became inoperative again . . . and just as I was in the process of noting down some very interesting fresh clues as to the probable origin of the Tareeg coup system. Will you try to attend to it?"

"Right away," Troy said, his vague fears dispelled. Clingman's recorders were a standard problem; the repair parts for such items were on the *Atlas* which had not come down into atmosphere for almost a year. There probably had been no reason to feel apprehensive about a night call to the office. It had happened on such occasions before.

HE went to work, glancing over from time to time at the senior scientist who was frowning down pensively at the writer. Before the Hammerheads executed his predecessors, Dr. Victor Clingman had been head of the Biology Department on the Cass Expedition, and his interest in the subject had not changed, though it was now centered exclusively on the life habits of their captors. The Tareegs did not seem to object to his preoccupation with them. Possibly it amused them; though Clingman had told Troy once, rather complacently, that his research already had proved to be of some usefulness to the Tareegs in answering certain questions they had had about themselves. That might also be true. On several occasions, at any rate, Troy had found either the Low Dsala or another Hammerhead officer in Clingman's office, answering the scientist's questions in high-

pitched, reedy voices which always had the suggestion of a whistle in them. All of them apparently had been taught human speech, though they rarely chose to use it.

Clingman cleared his throat, asked without turning his head, "Did I tell you, Gordon, that the Tareegs' known history goes back to considerably less than a thousand years, by human time reckoning?"

"Yes, you did, doctor," Troy said. It had become almost impossible for him to do work for Clingman—and Clingman invariably called on him personally when he had some mechanical chore on hand—without listening to a lengthy, rambling discourse on the scientist's latest discoveries about the Tareegs. It was an indication, he thought, that Clingman had grown increasingly hungry for human companionship of any kind. He could hardly fail to know that the majority of the station's human component was aware he had originated the suggestion made by the leading scientific group to the Hammerheads concerning the possibility of turning Cassa One into a Tareeg water world, and that he was generally despised for it. Troy's noncommittal attitude might have led him to believe that Troy either had not been informed of the fact or happened to be a man who saw noth-

ing very objectionable in such an act.

Troy was, as it happened, less certain than some of the others that Clingman and the men like Dr. Chris Dexter, who had been directing the ice-hauling operations of the *Atlas*, had come to a deliberate, cold-blooded agreement among themselves to save their own skins by offering to help the Hammerheads against mankind. It was perhaps more likely that they had acted in unthinking panic, following the gruesome executions the Hammerheads had forced them to witness. That would be more forgivable, if only slightly so. It was difficult to be sure about Clingman in any way. He might be unpardonably guilty in his own mind and still no less frightened than before—for who knew, after all, what the Tareegs ultimately intended with their prisoners? On the other hand, he might actually have buried all such considerations beneath the absorbed, objective interest he appeared to take in them.

TROY had paid no more attention than he could help at first to Clingman's scholarly monologues on his favorite theme. His own thoughts avoided the Hammerheads as far as possible. But as his personal plans began to develop and the chance that he might reach Earth grew into

something more than a wildly improbable hope, he realized that the more he learned about the new enemy, the more valuable an eventual report would be. Thereafter he listened carefully, memorizing all of Clingman's speculations, and gradually developed some degree of detached interest of his own in the creatures. They had a curious history, short though it was, a history of merciless strife on twin water worlds of the same system in which any records of a common background had been long lost or destroyed. Then had come the shock of mutual discovery and renewed battling, now on an interplanetary scale, which ended in a truce of carefully guarded equality between the rival worlds.

"That situation, it seems possible," Clingman had said once, "may have led to the legend of the lost home-world of the Tareegs." It was a cautious reference to the obvious fact that neither Tareeg planet would have been willing to admit that it might be no more than an ancient colony of its twin. A remote and glorious ancestral world which had brought both colonies forth as equals was a much more acceptable theory. "And yet," Clingman went on, "the legend might well be based in fact. And it may be that we, with our skills, will enable the Tareegs to rediscover that world. . . ."

It sounded, Troy had thought, with something like amused disgust, as if the scientific brass had prudently worked out a new scheme to preserve itself after the Cassa One operation closed out.

"There also, of course," Clingman continued, blinking his pale eyes reflectively at Troy, "we have the origin of the parallel legend of the Terrible Enemy. What except the conquest of the home-world by a monstrous foe could have caused it to forget its colonies? In that light, it becomes a little easier to understand the . . . ah, well . . . the . . . cautious distrust the Tareegs have shown towards the first intelligent species they encountered in interstellar space."

And that sounded like an attempted apology—not so much for the Tareegs and their manner of expressing cautious distrust as for Dr. Victor Clingman's collaboration with them. But Troy said nothing. By then he was very eager to hear more.

He did. Almost week by week, something new was added to the Hammerhead data filed away in his mind. Much of it might be unimportant detail, but Earth's strategists could decide that for themselves. The Tareeg coup system Clingman was mulling over again tonight had been of significance at least to the prisoners; for it probably was the rea-

son the majority of them were still alive. The two High Dsalas who, each representing one of the twin worlds, were in joint command of the Tareeg forces here would have gained great honor merely by returning to their system at once with the captured Earth expedition. But to have stayed instead, silently to have assumed personal responsibility for the creation of a new world fit for Tareeg use—that assured them honor and power beyond belief when the giant task was over and the announcement went out. . . .

THE awareness that Clingman was speaking again broke into Troy's thoughts.

"Almost everything they do," the scientist observed musingly, "is filled with profound ceremonial meaning. It was a long while before we really understood that. You've heard, I suppose, that cloud formations have appeared on this side of the planet?"

Troy was about to answer, then checked himself, frowning down at the cleanly severed end of the lead he had been tracing. Severed? What. . . .

"Gordon?"

"Uh . . . why, yes, I've seen them myself, doctor." Troy's mind began to race. The lead had been deliberately cut, no question of that. But why? He might have spent another hour checking

over the recording equipment before discovering it—

"It means, of course," he heard Clingman saying, "that the dry sea basins of Cassa One gradually are filling with water. Now, we know the vital importance to the Tareegs of being able to immerse themselves in the—to them—sacred fluid, and how severely they have been rationed in that respect here. One might have thought that, from the High Dsalas down, all of them would have plunged eagerly into the first bodies of water to appear on the planet. But, no . . . so great a thing must not be approached in that manner! A day was set, months in advance, when it could be calculated that the water level would reach a certain point. At that hour, every Tareeg who can be spared from essential duty will be standing at the shore of the new sea. And together . . ."

Abruptly, the meaning of Clingman's words faded out of Troy's mind.

The sudden nighttime summons to Clingman's office—had it been no accident after all? Had he done something in the past few hours to arouse suspicion, and was he being detained here now while his rooms were searched? Troy felt sweat start out on his face. Should he say anything? He hesitated, then reached quietly into the tool kit.

"... and only then"—Clingman's voice returned suddenly to his consciousness—"will the word be prepared to go back, and the messenger ships filled with the sacred water so that it can be blended at the same moment with the twin worlds' oceans, to show that Cassa One has become jointly a part of each . . ."

Messenger ships—the interstellar drones, of course. And the big troop of Hammerheads which had been taken from the station in the personnel carrier less than an hour ago . . . His hands trembling a little, Troy quickly closed the recorder, picked up the tool kit.

Clingman checked himself. "Oh . . . you've finished, Gordon?" He sounded startled.

Troy managed to work a grin on his face. "Yes, doctor. Just a broken lead. And now, if you'll excuse me. . . ." He started to turn away.

"Ah, one moment!" Clingman said sharply. "There was . . . I . . . now where. . ." He gazed about the table, pushing fretfully at the piles of notes. "Oh, yes! Dr. Rojas . . . Room 72 You were on your way up here when he attempted to reach you. Something that needed . . . well, I forgot now what he said. Would you mind going over there immediately?"

"Not at all." Troy's heart was pounding. If there had been any

doubt he was being deliberately delayed, it would have vanished now. Dr. Rojas, of course, would have something waiting that "needed" Troy's attention before he got to Room 72. A call from Clingman would arrange for it.

But if they were suspicious of him, why hadn't he been placed under arrest? They don't want to scare me off, Troy thought. They're not sure, and if I'm up to something they don't want to scare me off before they know just what it is. . . .

HE'D swung around to the hall, mind reaching ahead through the next few minutes, outlining quickly the immediate steps he would have to take—and so he was almost past the Hammerhead before he saw it. The door to the Low Dsala's offices had opened quietly, and the Low Dsala stood there five feet away, the horizontally stalked eyes fixed on Troy.

Troy started involuntarily. He might be very close to death now. To approach a Hammerhead . . . let alone the station's ranking officer . . . unbidden within a dozen steps was a dangerous thing for a prisoner to do. The Dsala's left hand hung beside the ornament-encrusted bolt-gun all the officers carried—and those broad torturers' hands could move with flashing speed. But the creature remained immobile.

Troy averted his eyes from it, keeping his face expressionless, walked on with carefully unhurried steps, conscious of the Dsala's stare following him.

It was one of the comparatively few times he had seen a Hammerhead without its suit. If one knew nothing about them, they would have looked almost comical—there was a decided resemblance to the penguins, the clown-birds of Earth, in the rotund, muscular bodies and the double set of swimming flippers. The odd head with its thick protruding eyelobes and the small, constantly moving crimson triangle of the mouth were less funny, as were the dark, human-shaped hands. Troy felt a chill on his back when he heard the Dsala break into sudden speech behind him: a high, quick gabble in its own language. Was it expressing anger? Drawing the door quietly shut, he heard Clingman begin to reply in the same tongue.

* * *

REESE looked briefly up from the intercom desk as Troy stopped before it. "Finished with Clingman?" he asked.

"Uh-huh," Troy said. "Any other little jobs waiting before I can get back to sleep?"

"Not so far," Reese told him sourly. "Pleasant dreams." He returned his attention to the panels before him.

So Dr. Rojas, as had seemed almost certain, had put in no call for him. But if he didn't show up at Room 72, how long before they began to wonder where he was? Perhaps four or five minutes. . . .

Troy stepped out of the elevator on the maintenance level forty seconds after leaving Reese, went quickly on into the engine room. One Hammerhead guard stood watching him from the far end. As a rule, three of them were stationed here. They were accustomed to Troy's appearances, and he had been careful to establish as irregular a pattern as was practicable in attending to routine chores, so that in an emergency his motions would draw a minimum of attention. Ignoring the guard now, he carried out a desultory inspection of a set of wall controls, paused four times to remove four minor sections of machinery and drop them into his tool kit, and was leaving the big room again a minute and a half later.

Out in the passage, he re-opened the kit, quickly snapped three of the small steel parts together. The carrying of firearms naturally was not a privilege the Tareegs extended to human beings; but the newly assembled device was a quite functional gun. Troy thumbed three dozen hand-made shells out of the fourth piece removed from the

control equipment, loaded the gun and shoved it into his pocket.

The door to his quarters was locked, and there were no immediate signs inside that an inspection might have been carried out during his absence. Troy moved over to the rarely used intercom view-screen, changed some settings behind it, and switched it on. The hidden back room appeared in the screen, and—in spite of his near-certainty about Clingman's purpose in detaining him—Troy felt his face whiten slowly with shock.

Jerry Newland was no longer lying on his bunk, was nowhere in the room. A gaping opening in the wall behind the bunk showed where the emergency tank Troy had brought in from the crashed courier ship had been installed. So they not only had the pilot in their hands—they already were aware of his identity and of the condition he was in.

Troy felt a surge of physical sickness. Left to himself, Newland would have died in the desert without regaining consciousness as the tank's independent power source began to fail. Troy had saved him from that; but very probably it was the Tareeg death the pilot faced now. Troy switched off the screen, started back to the door, fighting down his nausea. Self-blame was a luxury for which he had no time. He couldn't help Newland, and

there was not an instant to lose. Within a few hours, he could still be in space and take his chances alone at getting the warning to Earth.

But first the search for him must be directed away from the Tareeg hangar. And that, very fortunately, was an action for which he had long been thoroughly prepared. . . .

THE Hammerhead guard at the station's ground-level exit also had been reduced to one soldier. And here the appearance of the maintenance engineer's groundcar on its way to one of the automatic installations out in the desert was as familiar an occurrence as Troy's irregular inspection visits in the engine room. The guard watched him roll past without moving and without indication of interest. Troy glanced at his watch as the exit closed behind him. Not quite six minutes since he'd left Clingman's office . . . they should already have begun to check on his whereabouts, and the fact that he alone of all the humans at the station had access to a groundcar would then be one of the first things to come to their minds.

He slowed the car near a tiny inspection door in the outer wall of the station, cut its lights, jumped out and watched it roll on, picking up speed as it

swerved away to the east and rushed down into the dark desert. Months before he had installed the automatic guidance devices which would keep the car hurrying steadily eastwards now, changing direction only to avoid impassable obstacles. It might be that, at a time of such importance to the Tareegs, they would not attempt to follow the car. If a flier did discover it from the air, the vehicle would be destroyed . . . and it was rigged to disintegrate with sufficient violence then to conceal the fact that it had lacked a driver.

TROY opened the inspection door, then stopped for a moment, staring back at the Tareeg hangar beyond the station. Light had been glowing through its screens again when he came out; now the hazy translucence of the screens was drawing sideways and up from the great entrance rectangle. Another of the big personnel carriers nosed slowly out, moved up into the air and vanished against the night sky. If it was loaded as close to capacity as the one he had watched from inside the tunnel, almost two thirds of the Hammerhead force at the station had gone by now to attend the rites at Cassa One's new sea.

He waited while the force screen restored itself over the entrance. Immediately afterwards,

the lights in the hangar turned dim and faded away. Troy climbed in through the inspection door, locked it and started back down to the maintenance level.

With a little luck, he thought, he might even be able to work undisturbed now inside the interstellar drone he had selected for his escape. He would have to be back in the tunnel when the search-beams came through again . . . he suspected they might be quite sensitive enough to detect the presence of a living being inside one of the ships. But the Hammerheads themselves might not show up again until he was prepared to leave. And then it wouldn't matter. If they did appear—well, he would get some warning from the fact that the hangar lights would begin to come on first. Not very much warning, but it might be enough.

The passage leading past his quarters was empty and quiet. Troy remained behind a corner for a minute or two listening. If Dr. Rojas had reported his failure to arrive at Room 72, the Tareegs must also have learned by now that he had left the station, and the last place they would think of hunting for him was here. But somebody—Hammerhead or human stooge—might be in his rooms, making a second and more thorough investigation there.

EVERYTHING remained still. Troy came quietly out into the passage, went down it to the tool room next to his quarters, opened the door, taking the gun from his pocket, and slipped inside. With the door locked, he stood still a moment, then turned on the lights.

A glance around showed that nobody was lurking for him here. He darkened the room again, crossed it, removed the floor section over the tunnel entrance and slipped down into the tunnel. Working by touch, he pulled the floor section back across the opening, snapped it into place and started up the familiar narrow passage he had cut through the desert rock.

He couldn't have said exactly what warned him. It might have been the tiny click of a black-light beam going on. But he knew suddenly that something alive and breathing stood farther up the passage waiting for him, and the gun came quickly from his pocket again.

His forehead was struck with almost paralyzing force. Stun-gun . . . they wanted him alive. Troy found himself on his knees, dizzy and sick, while a voice yelled at him. *Human*, he thought, with a blaze of hatred beyond anything he'd ever felt for the Tareegs. *Traitor human!* The gun, still somehow in his hand, snarled its answer.

Then the stungun found him again, in three quick, hammering blows, and consciousness was gone.

* * *

There came presently an extended period of foggy, groping thoughts interspersed with sleep and vivid nightmares. After a time, Troy was aware that he was in a section of the sick bay on the *Atlas*, and that the great carrier was in interstellar flight. So the operation on Cassa One was over.

He wondered how long he had been knocked out. Days perhaps. It was the shrill, rapid-fire voice of a Tareeg which had first jolted him back into partial awareness. For confused seconds, Troy thought the creature was addressing him; then came the click of a speaker and the sounds ended, and he realized he had heard the Tareeg's voice over the ship's intercom system. A little later, it occurred to him that it had been using its own language and therefore could not have been speaking to him.

During that first muddled period, Troy knew now and then that he was still almost completely paralyzed. Gradually, very gradually, his mind began to clear and the intervals of sleep which always ended with terrifying nightmares grew shorter. Simultaneously he found he was acquiring a limited ability to

move. And that, too, increased.

It might have been three or four hours after his first awakening before he began to plan what he might do. He had made a number of observations. There were three other men in this section with him. All seemed to be unconscious. He thought the one lying in the bed next to his own was Newland, but the room was dim and he had been careful to avoid motions which might have been observed, so he wasn't certain. There was a single human attendant in the small room beyond the open doorspace opposite his bed. Troy didn't recall the man's face. He was in the uniform of a medical corpsman; but whatever else the fellow might be, he was here primarily in the role of a guard because he had a gun fastened to his belt. It classed him as a human being whose subservience to the Hammerheads was not in question. Twice, when the man in the bed at the far end of the room had begun to groan and move about, the guard came in and did something that left the restless one quiet again. Troy couldn't see what he used, but the probability was that it had been a drug administered with a hypodermic spray.

Getting his hands on the gun, Troy decided, shouldn't be too difficult if he made no mistakes. His life was forfeit, and to lie

and wait until the Tareeg inquisitors were ready for him wasn't to his taste. Neither . . . though somewhat preferable . . . was personal suicide. A ship, even as great a ship as the *Atlas*, had certain vulnerabilities in interstellar flight—and who knew them better than one of the ship's own engineers? The prime nerve centers were the bridge and the sections immediately surrounding it. It might be, Troy thought, it just might be that the Hammerheads never would bring their prize in to the twin worlds to have its treasures of technological information pried out of it. And that in itself would be a major gain for Earth.

HE turned various possibilities over in his mind with the detachment of a man who has acknowledged the inevitable fact of his own death. And he felt his strength flowing back into him.

The guard in the other room presently heard renewed groans and the slurred muttering of a half-conscious man. As he came in through the doorspace with the drug spray he walked into Troy's fist. It didn't quite put him to sleep, but the spray did thirty seconds later, and shortly he was resting, carefully bound and gagged since Troy didn't know how long the drug would retain its effect, in the back of a large clothes locker.

The man in the next bed was Newland. He seemed uninjured but was unconscious, presumably drugged like the other two. Troy left the section in the corpsman's uniform, the gun concealed in his pocket. It was improbable that the guard's authority to carry it extended beyond the sick bay area. In another pocket—it might come in handy—was the refilled drug spray.

He was two decks closer to the bridge section when it struck him how deserted the *Atlas* seemed. Of course, he had avoided areas where he would be likely to run into sizable groups of either men or Tareegs. But he had seen only six humans so far, only two of the Hammerheads. These last had come out of a cross-passage ahead of him and vanished into another, two men following quietly behind, the high-pitched alien voices continuing to make a thin, complaining clamor in the otherwise empty hall seconds after they had disappeared. And the thought came to Troy: suppose most of the ship's complement was down in the sleepers?

It wasn't impossible. The *Atlas* must still be provisioned for years to come, but an excellent way to avoid human mutiny on the approach to the Hammerhead worlds would be to put any captives not needed for essential

duty to sleep. And the *Atlas* hadn't been built for the convenience of water-creatures. To control a human skeleton crew would require a correspondingly small number of Tareegs. Most of their force, he thought, very well might be making the return in their own vessels.

THE reflection literally stopped Troy in his tracks. Because that could change everything he'd had in mind, opened up possibilities he hadn't thought existed . . . including the one, still remote though it might be, of returning the *Atlas* to Earth. Perhaps the men now in charge of the ship would be almost as unwilling to allow that to happen as the Hammerheads; they had too much to answer for. But if the situation he had imagined did exist, his thoughts raced on . . . why then. . . .

Troy's mind swam briefly with a wild premonition of triumph. There *were* ways in which it might be done! But because of that, there was also now the sudden need for much more caution than he had intended to use. What he needed first was somebody who could tell him exactly how things stood on board—preferably somebody in a position of authority who could be persuaded or forced to fall in then with Troy's subsequent moves.

THE bridge deck was as quiet as the others. On the old *Atlas*, most of this area had been officers' country, reserved for the expedition heads and top ship personnel; and presumably that arrangement had been changed only by the addition of Tareeg commanders and guards. Troy kept to the maintenance passages, encountered no one but presently found unused crew quarters and exchanged the corpsman uniform there for less conspicuous shipboard clothes. This would make a satisfactory temporary base of operations. And now to get the information he wanted. . . .

The voice was coming out of the only door open on the dim hall. There were six staterooms on either side, and Troy remembered that the room beyond the open door had been occupied by Dr. Clingman on the trip out from Earth. The voice—preoccupied, mild, a little tired—was unmistakably Dr. Victor Clingman's.

Was he alone? Troy thought so. He couldn't make out the words, but it was a monologue, not a conversation. He had the impression of Clingman dictating another rambling dissertation on Tareeg ways into a recorder; and the conviction came to him, not for the first time, that the man was in some essential manner no longer sane, that he

had come to believe that his observations on these deadly enemies some day really could be compiled into an orderly and valuable addition to human knowledge.

Sane or not, he was a frightened man, the perfect quarry for Troy's present purpose. With a gun on him, he would talk. And once having assisted Troy to any degree, he would be too terrified of Tareeg reprisals to do anything but switch sides again and go along with Troy, hoping that thereby the worst—once more—could be avoided. The worst for Victor Clingman. It would be impossible, Troy thought, to trust Clingman, but he could make very good use of him in spite of that.

He came quietly along the passage, his attention as much on the closed doors about him as on the one which was open. The guard's gun unfortunately wasn't a noiseless type, but he had wrapped a small cushion around its muzzle and across it, which should muffle reports satisfactorily if it came to that. Words became distinguishable.

"It is not a parasite in the ordinary sense," Clingman's tired voice said. "It is a weapon. It kills and moves on. A biological weapon limited to attack one species: the enemy. It is insidious. There is no warning and no defense. Unconsciousness and

death occur painlessly within an hour after contact, and the victim has not realized he is being destroyed. The radius of infection moves out indetectably and with incredible swiftness. And yet there was a method of containing this agent. That knowledge, however, is now lost.

"As an achievement of the Tureeg genius for warfare, the weapon seems matched—in some respects surpassed—only by the one used to counteract it. And in that, obviously, there were serious faults. They . . ."

The man, Troy decided, was quite close, perhaps twelve feet to the right side of the door. He glanced back along the silent hall, slipped the cover from the gun—with Clingman, he would only need to show it—then came into the room in two quick strides, turning to the right and drawing the door shut behind him.

THERE was no one in sight. The voice continued:

". . . desperate, with no time to complete essential testing. A terrible gamble, but one which inevitably . . ." The meaning faded from Troy's mind as he discovered the wall-speaker from which the words were coming. His eyes darted across the room to a comfortable chair drawn up beside a table, to a familiar picture of untidily arrayed piles of

notes on the table, a thread of smoke still rising from a cigarette in the tray among them. Clingman had been in the room within minutes, listening to one of his previous recordings as he worked. Troy's glance shifted to a closed door on his right. Bedroom and bath of the suite lay behind it. Clingman might be there. He might also . . . Troy reached back, quietly opened the door to the hall again, moved on and slipped out of sight behind an ornamental screen on the other side of the speaker.

Clingman could have left his quarters for some reason. In any event, it was obvious that he had intended to return to the room very shortly. If he brought someone with him, the situation might be more difficult. But hardly too difficult to be handled.

Troy worked the improvised silencer back over the gun muzzle, senses straining to catch either the opening of the door on his right or the sound of an approach down the hall.

"So it was possible," he heard the wall-speaker say, "to reconstruct, in almost every essential detail, what the concluding situation must have been on the world where the Tareeg species had its origin. The attacking section was safely screened, presumably by a form of energy barrier, against the deadly agent it had released. The section un-

der attack had no defense against an agent so nearly indestructible that it subsequently survived for over a thousand years in its inert, frozen condition without losing effectiveness in the least—”

Troy thought: What . . .
WHAT HAD IT SAID?

He stepped out from behind the screen as the door on his right opened. Dr. Clingman stood in the door, mouth open, eyes bulging in surprise and alarm at the gun in Troy's hand. Then his gaze shifted to Troy's face, and his expression slowly changed.

“Mister Gordon,” he murmured, smiling very cautiously, “you are really the most difficult man to keep stopped!”

Troy pointed a shaking finger at the speaker. “That!” he cried. “That . . . it said *a thousand years in the ice!*”

Clingman nodded. “Yes.” His eyes returned, still rather warily, to the gun. “And I’m rather glad, you know, you happened to catch that particular part before I appeared.”

Troy was staring at him. “That was their lost home world—the one you’ve kept talking about. That great asteroid cloud here. . . .”

“No, not here.” Clingman came forward more confidently into the room, and Troy saw now that the left side of the scien-

tist’s face and head was covered with medical plastic. “The Cassa system is a long way behind us, Gordon,” Clingman said. “We’ve been on our way back to Earth for more than two days.”

“To Earth,” Troy muttered. “And I . . .”

CLINGMAN jabbed a stubby finger down on a control switch at the table, and the wall-speaker went silent. “It will be easier to tell you directly,” he said. “You’ve already grasped the essential fact—our Tareeg captors, for the most part, are dead. They were killed, with some careful assistance from the men in charge of this expedition, by a weapon developed approximately twelve centuries ago on their ancestral world. A world which still circles today, though in a rather badly disintegrated condition, about the Cassa sun . . .

“But let’s be seated, if you will. You gave me a very unpleasant fright just now.” Dr. Clingman touched the side of his face. “I had an ear shot off recently by a man who didn’t wait to have the situation explained to him. His aim, fortunately, was imperfect. And there is still a minor war in progress on the *Atlas*. Oh, nothing to worry about now—it’s almost over. I heard less than twenty minutes ago that the last of the Tareeg

guards on board had surrendered. About fifty of them have become our prisoners. Then there is a rather large group of armed men in spacesuits in one section of the ship with whom we have been unable to communicate. They regard us as traitors to the race, Dr. Dexter and myself in particular. But we have worked out a system of light signals which should tell them enough to make them willing to parley. . . ."

He settled himself carefully into the big chair, turning a white, fatigued face back to Troy. "That," he said, waving his pudgy hand at the wall-speaker, "is a talk I made up to explain what actually has happened to the main body of the mutineers. They comprised a large majority of the crew and of the expedition members, of course, but fortunately we were able to gas most of them into unconsciousness almost at once, so that no further lives have been lost. We have begun to arouse them again in small groups who are told immediately that the space ice we were bringing in to Cassa One carried a component which has resulted in the destruction of the Tareeg force, and who are then given as much additional information as is needed to answer their general questions and convince them that we are still

qualified to command the Cassa-Expedition. I believe that in a few more days normal conditions on the ship will have been restored. . . ."

Clingman glanced over at the smoldering cigarette in the tray, stubbed it out and lit another. "We had been aware for some time of your plan to escape back to Earth in one of the Tareeg drones," he said. "It was an audacious and ingenious scheme which might very well have succeeded. We decided to let you go ahead with it, since it was by no means certain until the very last day that our own plans would be an unqualified success. On the other hand, we couldn't let you leave too early because the Tareegs certainly would have taken the *Atlas* to the twin worlds then without completing the Cassa One operation. And we didn't care to let you in on our secret, for reasons I'm sure you understand."

Troy nodded. "If they'd got on to me, I might have spilled that, too."

"Exactly," Clingman said. "There was no question of your loyalty or determination but the Tareegs' methods of persuasion might cause the most stubborn man to tell more than he should. So no one who was not essential to the work was given any information whatever. Dr. Rojas applied certain medical measures

which prevented Mr. Newland from recovering prematurely . . . prematurely from our point of view, that is. It did not keep you from completing your other preparations but ensured that you would not actually leave unless we believed the move had become necessary, as a last resort."

TROY shook his head. He'd been working against something there had been no way of knowing about. "Was that Rojas waiting for me in the tunnel?"

"Yes. At that point, we knew we would win, and it had become safe enough to tell you. Unfortunately, you believed it was a trap."

Troy chewed his lip. "On that home world of the Tareegs when the two factions were fighting—the losing side did something which blasted the whole planet apart?"

"Not exactly," Clingman said. "The appearance of it is rather that the home world came apart in an almost gentle manner, section separating from section. How that could be done is something no one on Earth had worked out at the time we left. The original survey group brought back samples of the asteroid swarm for analysis. A good deal was learned from them."

He paused, frowning at his

cigarette, said slowly, "The twin worlds have developed a new scientific Tareeg caste which was considered—or considered itself—too valuable to be risked on the interstellar expedition to the Cassa system. I think that was a very fortunate circumstance for us. Even before we left Earth, even when it was believed they were all dead, what had been deduced of the Tareeg genius for destruction was more than a little disturbing. The apparent purpose of that last defensive action on the home world was to strip the surface oceans from the hostile sections of the planet. Obviously, the process got out of hand; the entire planet was broken up instead. But one can't really doubt that—given more time—they would have learned to master the weapon."

"The killing agent developed by the opposing side evidently had been very thoroughly mastered. And again we can't say how they did it. It can be described as a large protein molecule, but its properties can be imagined only as arising out of a very complex organization, theoretically impossible at that level of life. It is confined to water, but its method of dispersion within that medium is not understood at all. At one instant, it is here; at the next, it apparently will have moved to a point perhaps several hundred miles away."

It is life which has no existence, and cannot exist, except as a weapon. Unlike a parasite, its purpose is simply to kill, quickly and efficiently, and go on at once to another victim. Having exhausted the store of victims—a short process, obviously, even in an area of planetary dimensions—it dies of something like starvation within days.

"That, of course, was as practical a limitation to those employing it as the one that it attacks only Tareegs. They did not want to be barred indefinitely from an area which had been cleansed of their enemies, and neither did they want food animals in that area to be destroyed. They . . ."

His voice trailed off, and Troy stirred restlessly. Dr. Clingman was slumped farther down in his chair now, and the pale, protruding eyes had begun to blink drowsily. He seemed about to go to sleep. Troy said, "If the thing killed the Tareegs on Cassa One inside an hour after they'd gone into the sea, then they couldn't have had the time to start the interstellar drones back towards the twin worlds."

Clingman's head turned to him again. "No," Clingman said. "Of course not."

"And even," Troy went on, "if they had been able to ship a couple of loads of infected water back, it would have been harm-

less long before it reached their worlds."

CLINGMAN nodded. "Quite harmless. As harmless as the new ocean on Cassa One would be by this time to Tareegs who entered it." He paused. "We'd thought, Gordon . . . as you might be thinking now . . . of sending the drones back instead with a load of asteroid ice containing the inert agent. That, of course, would not have reduced its effectiveness. Nevertheless, the scheme wouldn't have worked."

"Why not?" Troy asked.

"Because the drones, in the Tareeg view, were sacred messengers. They could be used only to announce in a certain prescribed manner that the Tareeg interstellar expeditionary force had discovered a water planet and taken possession of it, again with the required ceremony, for the twin worlds. The transmission of lumps of interplanetary ice would never have fitted that picture, would, in fact, have been an immediate warning that something very much out of order had occurred.

"That Tareeg insistence on exact ritualistic procedure—essentially a defensive measure in their dealings with one another—also happened to delay our own plans here very badly. Except for it, we would have been ready

at least a year ago to flood Cassa One and entrap our captors."

Troy repeated, stunned, "You would have been ready . . ."

"Yes, but consider what might have resulted from that over-hasty action. The Cassa system is much more readily accessible from the twin worlds than it is from Earth, and if we made some mistake with the drones, or if the Tareegs began to suspect for any other reason that their expeditionary force had met with disaster, they would be certain to establish themselves at once in a very strong manner here, leaving Earth confronted with a dangerously talented and implacable new enemy. No, we had to retain the appearance of helplessness until we had acquired an exact understanding of the manner in which the water-message must be prepared, and had discovered some substitute for the freezing effect on the lethal agent. That took an extra year.

Troy said carefully, "And during that year, as you knew would happen, another dozen or so men

died very slow and painful deaths on the Tareeg execution benches. Any one of those men might have been you or I . . ."

"That is quite true," Clingman said. "But it was something that could not be avoided. In that time, we *did* learn the necessary ritual and we *did* find a numbing catalyst which will hold the protein agent inert until it loses its effect by being sufficiently diluted again. So now the drones have been dispatched. Long before this ship reaches Earth again, the agent will have been introduced to the twin worlds, and except for the specimens we carry on board, the Tareeg species will be extinct. It may not be a pleasant thing to have a pair of ghost worlds forever a little on our conscience—but one does not have to fight uncertain wars with ghosts."

Troy studied him in silence for some seconds.

"And I thought you were soft," he said at last. "I thought you were weak and soft . . ."

THE END



FORGOTTEN WORLD

By ROBERT SILVERBERG

They sent Wilcox out to find a certain world. And if you don't think that was a tough assignment, go out some clear night and start counting the stars. So his odds were long. But far longer the odds of his staying alive after he found it.

WILCOX had been looking for the planet, but hadn't figured on crash-landing. He was part of a great search-pattern that covered the galaxy in orderly sweeps; looking for a planet whose location had been forgotten; whose name was a hazy blur.

He'd stumbled over it, still not sure it was what he sought; but his ship was out of control, and he plunged toward its blue-green surface.

"Wilcox to Central."

The reply after a brief time-lag. "Come in, Wilcox."

"Developed silication of reactor. Abandoning ship in vicinity of uncharted planet. Do you read me?"

"We read you. Transmit coordinates. We'll get a rescue ship out. Over."

Wilcox computed swiftly.

"Wilcox to Central. Coordinates as follows." He paused. "Do you read me?"

No acknowledgement. The radio was dead except for occasional click of submicronic particles crashing against the magnetic filter.

"Do you read me?"

No answer. He looked out the port. The planet below was spinning ever larger. If it were the one he hoped, he stood a chance of finding people and a transmitter and relaying his position to a rescue team. If not—

Wilcox gathered together some food pellets, his blaster, thumbnail-sized microeditions of the Bible and Shakespeare's plays, stuffed them in the pockets of his spacesuit and sealed the flaps. He locked the ship on course, a collision or-

bit with the nearing planet. Then, dropping through the hatch, he drifted out into space, to hang motionless while his ship drifted silently away.

He watched the gleaming hull blaze up as it entered the planet's atmosphere. A few seconds later, it was a smoking heap of slag racing to a crash-landing.

Wilcox fired two blaster shots, setting himself in motion. He drifted downward, and entered the gravitational field of the planet below.

"Are you from the skies, stranger?"

Wilcox stared at the girl. She came up silently as he cut himself free of his parachute. She seemed unafraid.

"I am from the skies," he told her. "Can you tell me how far it is to the nearest city?"

"City? What's a city?" Her pronunciation was oddly old-fashioned, as though she spoke a dialect long out of date.

"A place where a lot of people live together. A big village."

"Why would many people want to live together?"

He smiled. There was something infectious about her innocence, as she stood there wrapped in a ragged animal-

hide. "That's a hard one to answer."

"Why do you hide behind that great heavy bearskin? It is a fine warm day. Even my deerskin feels too heavy for me."

"You've got a point there," Wilcox admitted. He pressed the unsealing stud and his spacesuit split longitudinally. The girl gaped as he stepped out from between the two halves and began unloading the things he had stored in the spacesuit pockets and stuffing them into his tunic. It was a strange sight.

"Those are remarkable things you wear," the girl said. "So big and heavy. It must be cold where you come from."

Wilcox looked around. It was a good place. Leafy trees; a carpet of grass; a blue pond nearby. Birds sang overhead, and the yellow sun was warm and comforting. A good planet, he thought.

Only—was it the planet he was looking for?

It seemed too unspoiled, too primeval for that. The planet he wanted would most likely be groaning with cities; would not have an inch of free space.

"Why do you stand there thinking so hard?" the girl asked. "You look worried.



He was torn between the Beast and Beauty—not knowing which was more dangerous.

Tell me your name and I'll tell you mine."

"Wilcox."

"I'm Arma."

"Where do your people live, Arma?"

"All over," she said, gesturing. "Come on, let's go swimming. It's a hot day, and I'm tired of talking so much."

"Swimming?"

She took him by the arm and began dragging him over the meadow toward the shimmering pond. "I love to swim, don't you?"

He let her pull him along until they reached the pond where the girl slipped out of her deerskin. Her lithe, graceful body was tanned from head to toe.

As Wilcox stood there, completely confused, she asked, "You're not going swimming with your clothes on, are you?"

"You're not going swimming at all." This new voice, deep, masculine, came from behind him. "Get your clothes on, Arma. Who is this stranger?"

Wilcox whirled to see a deeply tanned, well-muscled man clad in deerskin, with a gleaming sword grasped firmly in his right hand. He was a big man, matching Wilcox's own six-three.

"Who are you, stranger?" he repeated.

"He came from the sky" Arma said. "I found him, and—"

"Be quiet, Arma." He strode past Wilcox toward the girl, who was hastily donning her deerskin. He slapped her. Fingermarks stood out on the girl's brown cheek. She staggered backward.

"My name is Lorvik," said the man. "I don't allow my women to fool around with strangers. Draw and defend yourself!"

The newcomer's sword flashed in the sunlight. Wilcox started to protest that he had no sword, but saw it would do no good. He sidestepped. The blade whistled past his ear.

Wilcox reached for his blaster and was ready for Lorvik's next charge. As the sword sang through the air, Wilcox fired once, on medium beam. Lorvik howled and stared down stupidly at the stubby hilt of his sword—all that was left.

Lorvik's face was white with terror. "Lightning—out of his hand—struck my sword." He hurled it away in terror.

Wilcox lowered the blaster. "Now I'm in charge."

"No you're not!" cried

Arma. She sprang to his side. Before he was aware of what was happening she had wrenched the blaster from his relaxed grasp and hurled it into the depths of the pond.

Stunned by her action, he blurted, "Why'd you do that?"

"Such weapons are unfair," she said. "You could kill us all, Wilcox. We have no such things on our world."

Despite his anger, he had to admit the justice of what she said. If the best weapon they had here was the broadsword, a man with a blaster could wreck their civilization. Arma had wisely taken advantage of a lapse on his part to dispose of this threat to their social structure. From now on, he'd be on equal terms with these people.

Lorvik advanced toward him barehanded.

"Now none of us have any weapons," Lorvik said. "Now we will see who is stronger." And he leaped toward Wilcox.

The spaceman met the charge standing up and pushed Lorvik back a couple of steps with two quick blows to the stomach. Lorvik seemed rock-hard. His fist ripped into the spaceman's midsection, but Wilcox caught his breath and rode with the blow. Then

Lorvik seemed to be crawling all over him, pushing him down, getting his steely fingers around Wilcox's throat.

Wilcox arched his back against the ground and forced himself back to an erect position. He tugged at Lorvik's fingers, broke the hold, and smashed his fist into the other's jaw. Lorvik rocked and Wilcox followed with a sharp body-blow beneath the heart. He realized now that the gravity of this planet was considerably lighter than that of his native world, and that gave him a definite muscular advantage. He pressed forward and finally knocked Lorvik sprawling with a left to the chin.

The warrior struggled to a sitting position but made no attempt to get up. "You have won," he admitted finally. "You have beaten me." He got unsteadily to his feet and took a few wobbling steps. Wilcox remained on guard until it was evident that Lorvik had no fight left in him.

"You are a mighty warrior," Lorvik said humbly. "The girl is yours."

Wilcox recoiled, startled. Had they been fighting over the girl? Apparently they had, because Arma came running toward him and nestled against his side, while Lorvik

limped away, looking defeated and unhappy.

"You have beaten him," the girl said. "It is the first time anybody has. He won't bother you any more."

Wilcox looked down at her and smiled. It made him feel good to know that a representative of the galactic civilization could still hold his own in a fistfight with a barbarian.

Only—would he ever see that galactic civilization again?

He turned to Arma. "Now I want to go to where your people live. There is something I must find out."

"First we finish our swim," she said playfully, as she gracefully swam about.

The village was a little huddle of thatched huts about two miles back the other way. As Arma and Wilcox entered it, he heard a subdued buzzing of voices. Probably they had heard that their invincible Lorvik had been conquered, and wanted to see who had done the undoable.

A small, white-haired man emerged from one of the huts.

"My father," Arma said. "Father, this is Wilcox. He has taken me away from Lorvik."

"The news had reached us already." The old man looked

Wilcox up and down. "Welcome to our tribe," he said.

"I'm not here to stay. I've come from the skies, and I intend to return."

The old man showed surprise. "Eh? The skies?"

Wilcox nodded. "My ship went out of control and crashed. I have to get to a radio and call my people to come rescue me."

"A what?"

"A radio," Wilcox said carefully. "A machine for calling through space from one planet to another."

Both Arma and her father chuckled. "No such thing has ever existed," the old man said. "And none will." Smiling, he went back into his hut.

Wilcox turned to Arma. "Does he really mean that?"

She shrugged. "We have no such instrument. We have few machines at all. There were some, in the old days, but they have been forgotten and buried."

Wilcox leaned forward. "What do you know of the old days?"

"Not much. We know that once many people lived here, and that most of them are gone. There are not many tribes left here."

Wilcox nodded. This was starting to sound more and more like the forgotten planet

that was being sought in the most intense hunt in the history of the civilized galaxy. But a lot of good it would be to have found it, if he had no way of leaving or of notifying Central of his accidental discovery.

Arma came close to him and nestled against him. He smiled. Even if he never did get back, would it be so bad?

They gave him Lorvik's old hut, and the defeated warrior—moved out into a smaller one. Wilcox discovered that the natives here operated on a strict code of honor, in which a triumph was a triumph and a defeat a defeat. Lorvik, in defending his honor, had lost, and accepted the loss without malice.

"You look unhappy, Wilcox," Arma said one evening, as they sat outside their hut.

"Not really," he said. "I like it here. It's quiet and clean. I've been really at peace, for the first time in my life. Only—"

"Only what, Wilcox?"

He started to tell her about the great galaxy outside, the millions of worlds decking the sky. Her eyes widened as he told her of the glittering brilliance of his home world, Canopus IV, of the mechanized cities of Rigel, of tele-

vision and tridims and the thrill of a rocket-blast as you pounded from one planet to the next.

He spoke for perhaps half an hour without stopping, re-creating the universe he had left behind when he had crash-landed on this primitive alien world. Then he stopped, realizing he had been speaking too long, and looked at her. She was watching him, entranced.

"It sounds wonderful," she said softly.

He nodded. "And I'll never see it again. There's no way of getting back."

She fell silent for a while. Then her eyes brightened and she said, "Wilcox?"

"Yes, Arma?"

"If—if I found you a way of getting back, would you take me with you, out there to the skyworlds?"

He turned, surprised at her remark. "What?"

She smiled gently. "It would mean doing a very bad thing—but I know you would like to get home. And I would like to go with you," she added shyly.

"What do you mean?" he asked, his voice excited.

"Out there—over the hill, and down a long, winding road—there is another village, a bigger one. And in

that village, there is a temple. A temple that keeps all the old things, the things from the forgotten past. You might be able to find a—a radio, there."

"Where, Arma? When can we leave?"

She put a hand on his wrist. "It is forbidden to enter the temple. The people of the other village guard it day and night. It is a sacred place, and there are great taboos against the things it contains. I—I am frightened. But I'll take you there, and perhaps you will find what you want."

He stood up. "I wish you hadn't thrown my blaster away. It's going to be hard to fight my way into that temple with just a sword."

She blushed. "I had to do it. You might have killed us all with it; I didn't know."

"I understand. All right, let's go."

"Right now?"

"Right now," Wilcox said. His heart was pounding; there was a way home after all.

Morning was breaking when they reached the other village.

"There it is," she said. She pointed ahead.

On a low hill another village was clustered, and be-

hind it was a tall, glass-walled building which looked oddly out of place in these primitive surroundings.

"It is left from the old times," Arma said. "Everything else is gone."

They entered the village. The shining bulk of the temple grew closer.

They rounded a corner and took a new path that led up toward the temple. And, suddenly, from no place, a dozen men with unsheathed swords stepped out and blocked their path.

Wilcox was astonished to recognize the leader as Lorvik. He tried to circumvent the blockade but Lorvik intervened. "You were overheard talking outside your hut last night. We knew you were going to try and enter the temple."

More men crowded around. Wilcox saw now that they were men of both villages, half strangers and half familiar faces. Evidently all the local warriors had raced to the other village to head him off.

He drew his sword with great ostentation and held it firmly at his side.

"You can't fight them all," Arma said.

"I don't want to," said Wilcox. He took a step forward

toward the angry men who barred his path. "Let me through."

"You can't go through," replied Lorvik. "The temple is taboo. No man is allowed to enter it."

Very deliberately, Wilcox sheathed his sword and walked toward them. Several of the men bristled their weapons in the air, ready to strike.

"I have come from a distant world, sent here to see what your world is like. Today is the day I am supposed to contact my people. If they don't hear from me today, they will invade and lay waste to your entire planet."

The men turned and conferred with each other. Wilcox watched them. Out of the corner of his eye he saw Arma slipping noiselessly into the underbrush. He tensed, hoping she would be unnoticed.

Lorvik looked uneasily at Wilcox. "How can we believe you? We have been taught that fire from the gods will descend on us if we *do* enter the temple—and you say we will be destroyed if you *don't*!"

"That's your problem," Wilcox said evenly. The villagers looked more and more confused. Arguments started to break out among them.

Wilcox sucked in his breath and tightened his muscles.

He had stalled long enough. He backed up a few steps, then a few more. Then, gathering his strength, he ran forward and leaped.

Gravity was on his side. His greater muscular strength carried him up, brought him soaring over the heads of the astonished villagers, and deposited him some ten feet behind them. Without looking back, he began to run up the hill toward the temple.

Arma was waiting for him there, and the metallic gleam in her hand told him that the girl had acted intelligently. He dashed up to where she stood and she handed him the blaster.

The metal felt cool and comforting against the palm of his hand. It was a really antique model, though still recognizably a blaster. He aimed at the ground and pressed the firing stud. Nothing happened. In the thousands of years since the blaster had been charged, the power had, of course, dissipated. But he wouldn't need any power for what he had in mind.

He looked down the hill. The townsfolk were straggling up toward them in superstitious awe, still clinging

to their swords but obviously unwilling to have much to do with anyone who had the power of flight. He permitted them to come within twenty yards.

"Stop!"

They stopped. Wilcox faced them, letting the sunlight glint off his blaster.

A big man shouted. "Let's charge him! He can't fight all of us!"

"I wouldn't advise it," Wilcox said. "Not while I have this."

"What is a piece of metal against men with swords?"

"Tell them, Lorvik," Wilcox commanded.

"He used it on me," Lorvik said hoarsely. "It—it melted my sword away. He can burn us to death with it."

The crowd took a few steps backward. Some turned and ran off back toward the village.

"Go," Wilcox shouted, brandishing the blaster. "Go before I call down lightning on you all!"

The remainder followed suit. Wilcox smiled and handed the useless blaster to Arma. "Stay out here and keep guard. If anyone comes sneaking back, yell."

In the temple musty cobwebs hung down from every-

where, causing him to cough and choke. He knew what the place was—a museum—a monument to a vanished civilization, probably the finest civilization the galaxy had ever known.

There were secrets worth fortunes in here, secrets out of the distant past that had long been forgotten. Wilcox knew of the legends about this world, of the ancient teleport machines, the matter transmitters, the other wonders of the ancients that had been lost, over the course of millennia, by the galaxy. Legend said they were here—and they were.

He had to find a radio first, and the other things could wait.

He groped through the blackness, past exhibit cases and unopened boxes—the wonders of a lost civilization, taboo to the primitive villagers who were its only pitiful survivors. He saw the broken case of firearms from which Arma had grabbed the blaster. He continued to fumble.

Then he stumbled on it, the way he had stumbled upon the planet itself. It was a sub-radio set, still functioning and not too different from sets still in use.

After some moments' difficulty with the unfamiliar an-

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cient characters, he got the thing to work . . .

"Fire us the coordinates, will you?"

From memory, Wilcox recited off the figures he had been about to give before his radio went dead aboard ship.

"It fits the description, all right. Yellow sun, oxygen-and-nitrogen atmosphere, and green vegetation. These identifications all tally? Over."

"They tally," Wilcox said. "We've found it, all right. And it's the treasure-trove we expected."

"Good job, Wilcox. We'll have a rescue ship right down."

Arma was waiting for him outside.

"Any trouble?"

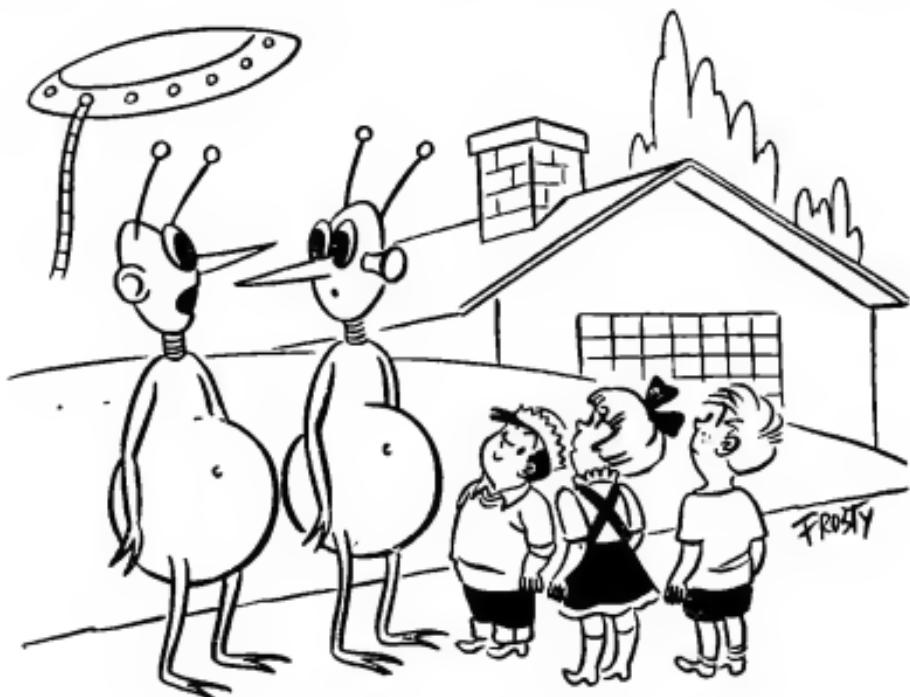
"None at all. They're really scared. You find the radio?"

He nodded. "They'll have a ship down here pretty soon."

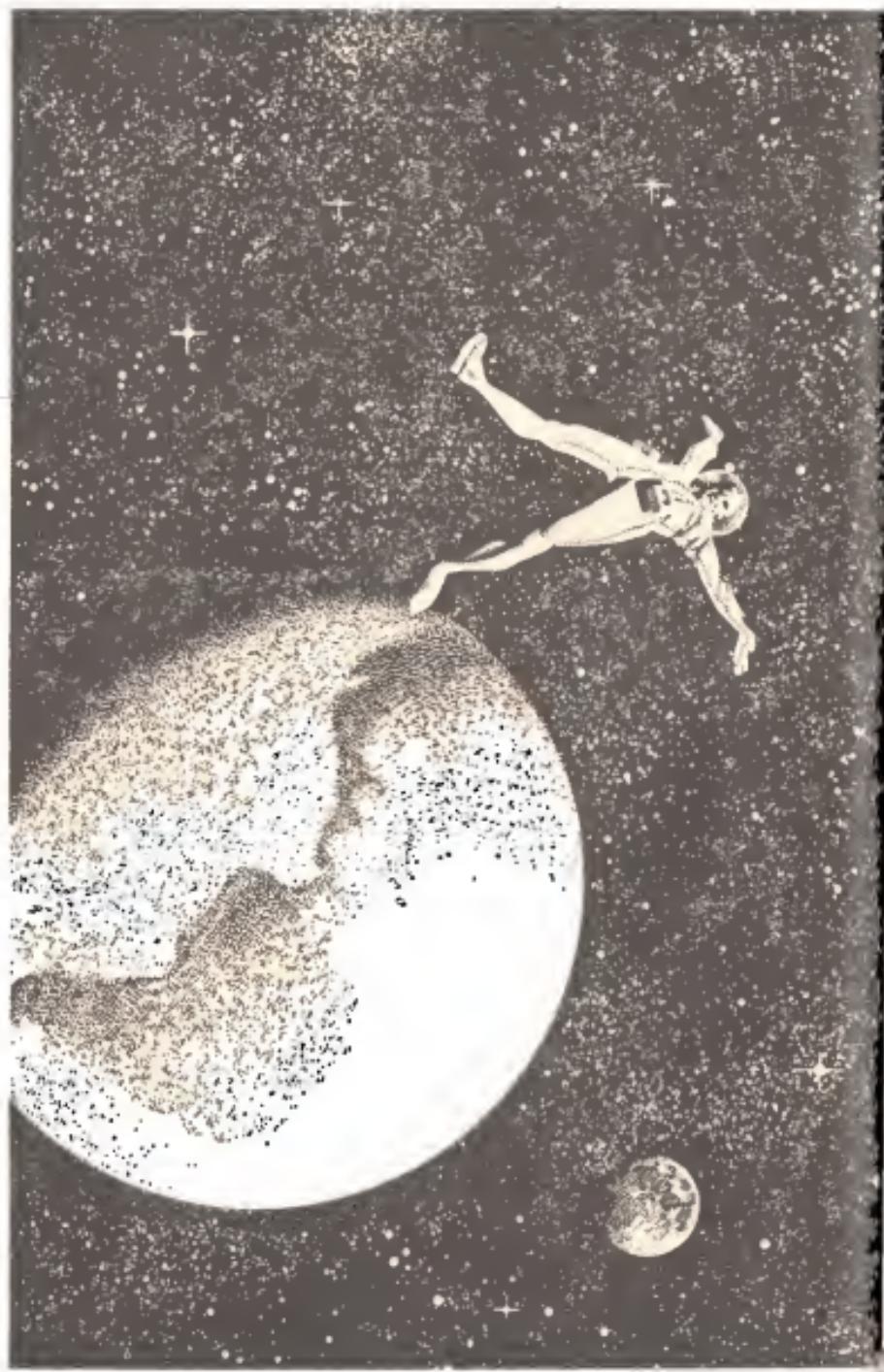
"And it will take us back to where you come from," Arma said. "I can't wait, darling!" She looked up at him anxiously as he put his arm around her and they began to walk back down the hill. "But—is this the place you were looking for?"

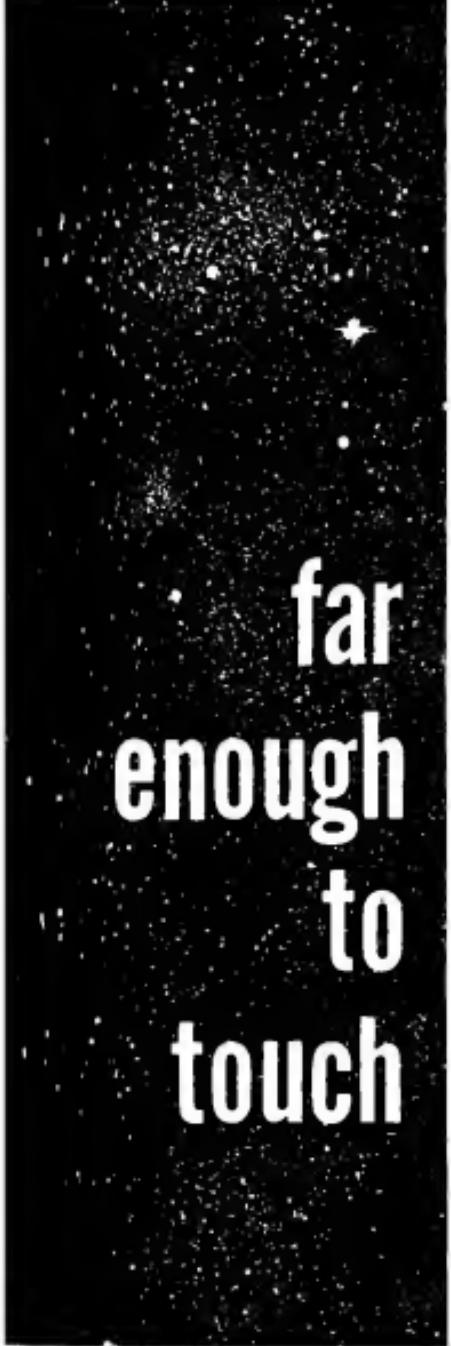
"Of course it is," he said, smiling. "I never doubted it from the first. This is Earth, all right."

THE END



"Ask which one invented the atom bomb."





far enough to touch

THE ship had a crew of six, and Rene Duport was the youngest. The pilot, who held the rank of lieutenant colonel in the U.S. Air Force and Master Pilot in the United Nations Space Corps, was one of the two Americans aboard. The co-pilot was Russian, the navigator a Finn, the engineer an African, and the research observer was the other American. Rene Duport was a Belgian, and he was the radio-man, and the youngest ever to go to the Moon.

It had been a routine flight

By STEPHEN BARTHOLOMEW

Illustrated by SCHELLING

Rene Duport was the quiet member of the moonship's crew. So quiet that it took several minutes before anyone noticed that he jumped overboard—into space.

since the ship had lifted from the lunar surface. In a little less than six hours they were due to enter parking orbit. Twelve hours later, with a minimum of luck, the ferry ship would dive to its landing area near the Marianas, and the six crew members would be once again on Ground. Rather, they would be floating in the middle of the Pacific Ocean, but

that was far more solid than space. All the Earth was sacred Ground to them, including the sea. Each of them anticipated the moment when they would scoop salt water up in their hands and fling their oxygen masks into the depths and raise their faces to the burning ocean sun, yet they tried not to think of the moment, they kept it in the backs of their minds, as if thinking of it consciously could bring bad luck.

All except Rene Duport, who was nineteen years old, and the youngest ever to enter space. He had loved it out there, on the Moon, and he loved being here in the ship. He wanted to go back out again, and he was the only one of the six who was reluctant to return to Ground. Perhaps if the spacemedics had known of this unnatural—almost inhuman—state of Rene Duport's mind, they would never have let him go out. Then again, perhaps he was one of a new breed of men, born under new signs in the Zodiac, the signs of Gagarin and Glenn, equipped with a kind of mind and soul never known before. He was the only one of the six who did not want to go Home.

THE American pilot turned to mutter something to his Russian co-pilot, seated next to him at the front of the ship. The Russian nodded and adjusted a

dial. By formal agreement the crew spoke in French between themselves. But the pilot's accent was bad, and Duport would have preferred to talk to him in English. He could not help smiling to himself whenever the American said something. Frowning, Duport moved his headphone slightly and changed the frequency of his receiver. The Azores tracking station had begun to fade with the rotation of the Earth, but he had no trouble picking up Hawaii. He wrote down the latest fix and passed the slip of paper forward to the navigator. He switched on his transmitter to give Hawaii an acknowledgement.

Forward, the American pilot heard Duport speaking to Hawaii. *This is the moonship Prospero acknowledging transmission. . . .* The American pilot did not like using French either. He would have preferred speaking English or Russian. There was something poetic about French. The phrase *bateau du lune*, moonship, always gave him a quiver. It made him think of some kind of ghost ship, with a moss-covered hull and gossamer sails, floating silently in a midnight sky. There was something—fragile about the language, especially as Duport spoke it in his smooth, pure accents.

The American glanced into a mirror that gave him a view of

the cabin behind him. Duport sat by himself at the extreme rear of the cabin, the radio console hiding most of his body. The headphones and mike covered most of his face, so that only his nose and eyes were visible. His eyes were light blue and seemed to glisten, unnaturally bright, as if the boy had been taking some kind of drug. He was only nineteen years old. The pilot had had misgivings about Duport from the beginning when the crew was first formed. It wasn't only his youth, he didn't quite know what it was. There was something about Duport, something deep in his personality that he did not trust. But he did not know how to name it.

Still, Duport had functioned all right so far. And the Selection Board should know its business. The crew had been chosen, as usual, by competitive examination, and if there was any flaw in Duport's character it would have turned up sometime during the six-month training period. Probably Duport was as good as any of them. He had been a child prodigy, he'd taken his Master's in physics at the age of seventeen. He knew as much as any of them, and he had made no mistakes so far.

Still, the American remembered the first time he had seen Duport. It had been right after the Selection Board published the

crew list. Out of the two hundred who finished the training program, the Board had given Duport highest rating. He was not only the youngest ever to enter space, he was the only crew-member of the *Prospero* who had never been in space before, except of course for the ballistic shoots which were part of training. The American himself had been aboard the *Quixote* on the first moonshot directed by the U.N. Space Corps. Then they had built the *Prospero*, and he had piloted it on its shakedown cruise in orbit. And the Board had chosen him to fly the ship on its first trip to the Moon. Altogether, it was the fourth shot of the U.N. Space Corps, and the second time he had been on the Moon. He, the American, was the veteran, he had spent more hours in space than any other human being alive.

AND he remembered the first time he had seen Duport. The veteran and the kid. He had met him in the briefing room at the launching site at Christmas Island. The veteran had been studying a thrust table, and the kid had come into the room, half an hour early for the first briefing. The American did not hear him come in. He looked up from his desk, and there he was, Duport, standing at attention in his blue Corps uniform with the silver

sunburst in his lapel, indicating active commission.

"Christ!" the American had burst out, forgetting himself and speaking in English. "Are you Duport? They told me you were young . . ." He already knew each of the other crewmen.

"Yes sir, Duport answered in English. "I'm afraid I am rather young. Corpsman Duport reports for briefing, sir. I just arrived on the island an hour ago."

The American recovered himself. He leaned back in his chair to study the boy. He was blond and had light blue eyes that glittered, and he looked like a high school kid.

"*Eh bien, parlon français,*" the American said at last. "Sorry, Duport, I didn't mean to offend you. It's just that it was a shock. . . . Why are you smiling like that?"

"Nothing, sir." Duport's mouth straightened itself out.

"What do you mean *rien*? No, tell me, Duport. You should know by now that the Corpsman's first law is that we tell each other what's on our minds. If we're going to be sealed up together in a tin can for two weeks. . . ."

"I'm sorry sir, it was your accent. I found it amusing."

"Oh, that. You're not the first one. *Eh bien.* Have you been assigned quarters yet, Duport?"

"No, sir."

"I'll see to it myself after the

briefing. You'll find conditions are rather primitive on the island, but you won't be here long. The ferryboat leaves in six days."

"Yes, sir."

The American was fascinated by Duport's eyes, their unnatural, bright glaze. The boy never seemed to blink. He yet stood at attention, looking down at the older man with unshifting eyes.

"Stand at ease, Duport. As long as you're early, we might as well start the briefing now." On an impulse, he went to the projection screen and touched a switch which flashed on a photomap of the lunar landing area. He pointed to a particular object which was visible only because of the long shadow it cast.

"As you are well aware, Duport, the research station is here, near the center of the Crater of Copernicus. The three trips so far by the *Quixote* have been sufficient to set up the dome and to land enough equipment to keep the colony independent for several months if necessary. So far, there aren't any men there. That's our job, the *Prospero's*. We're going to have five passengers with us, research scientists, I haven't met them yet. All I know about them is that one is American and one Russian. Our job is to get them into the station, alive, and then bring back the ship. What they do up there

afterward is none of our business."

"Yes, sir," Duport answered, still at attention. "I have already been told this."

"Yes, I haven't told you anything that you don't already know. And of course you also know that the bottom of Copernicus Crater, like all other flat areas on the Moon, is a kilometer deep with nearly molecular dust, micrometeorite residue. You know that before the first landing by the *Quixote*, it was necessary to explode a hydrogen bomb in order to fuse the surface of the dust into a thick crust of glass, in order to get a stable landing stage." The American paused, turned away from the photomap, and looked at Duport again.

"Yes sir."

BUT something you don't know is that certain automatic instruments left at the station by the *Quixote* have given an indication that this landing crust was weakened by the last lift-off. The instruments may be wrong, or they may be right. We're going to find out."

"I—see."

"Yes." The veteran leaned against the wall and looked at the boy's eyes. "The *Quixote* is a heavy ship, and the *Prospero* is heavier. We're going to have to set her down easy. *Very* easy. That crust is hard, but thin. You

know what will happen if the ship breaks through. The rocket nozzles will clog with dust, and the ship will sink to the cabin bubble. We'll be stuck on the Moon."

"Yes sir," was all that Duport said.

"Yes sir! The point is, Duport, that every member of the crew is going to have to function as part of the machine, the radioman included. The slightest error could be crucial on this one. You're going to have to leave your nerves behind. Once we set her down, we should be all right. But I hope to God your training program has really got you ready for this."

"I know it has, sir." Duport stood there, silent, at attention, perhaps waiting for something else. But the American did not know what else to tell him. He was trying to figure Duport out. Even then he had a feeling that there was something about the boy that was *wrong*. Something he could not understand. He stared at his cold blue eyes.

At last Duport said, "Once the research station really gets going, the results should be magnificent, sir."

The American moved away. "Yes, but don't be naive, Duport. Don't believe what you read in the papers. The real reason for the station—the reason for the U.N. Space Corps—is practical politics. If the Corps didn't exist, the U.S. and Russia

would go to the Moon separately. And neither side would tell the other what they were doing there. A joint effort is the only way to make sure that nobody plants missiles up there. Science is secondary. We're like two gunmen afraid to turn our backs on each other."

"Yes sir, of course you are right," Duport said. And as the American moved toward the desk he glanced back at Duport and saw the boy staring at the lunar photomap, his eyes coldly reflecting light. The muscles of his jaw were working visibly, slowly tightening and then relaxing again. It was as if he were trying to memorize every detail of the map.

* * *

And thinking back on that day, the American pilot wondered if he were any closer to understanding Duport. Suddenly he thought he was. For the first time he thought about the way the muscles of Duport's jaw moved. He had never really considered that before. The brightness of the boy's eyes had always distracted his attention. He looked into the mirror again, at Duport seated by himself at the rear of the cabin, bowed over his console and listening to his headphones. The pilot could see only part of Duport's left lower jaw. But yes, the muscles were working. Slowly they contracted

until they stood out like knots, then slowly relaxed again.

Nerves, that was the word. Now the pilot knew what name to give it. Why hadn't he seen it before? Duport seemed cold, efficient, the pilot thought, always he seemed to function like part of the machine, part of the ship. But always the muscles of his jaw were working, and the shine of his eyes kept you from looking at his mouth, kept you from noticing the one sign that Duport had a nervous system. The pilot saw that under Duport's cool, steady surface, the boy was wound to nearly the snapping point, to the uttermost limit of his nervous system's tensile strength. It was his nerves that gave Duport his machinelike efficiency, his quick response time, his endurance. As long as he kept them under control. It was his nerves, too, that made his eyes glitter, like the eyes of a madman masquerading as sane. Why hadn't the medics ever seen it? The pilot wondered what would happen if Duport ever, for a moment, were to forget himself and lose control of his nerves.

Well, the boy had lasted this far. During the tense moments of the lunar touchdown he hadn't cracked. He had responded to orders as if he were an electric relay. He had done his job. It had turned out that the land-

ing crust was not weakened after all, but none of them had known that then. Duport had passed that test. Perhaps, the pilot thought, he was wrong about Duport, perhaps he was really what he seemed to be, cool and nerveless. At any rate, he would tell his suspicions to the medics, back on Ground. Time enough, he thought, time enough.

THE research observer, the other American in the crew, had been busy taking pictures for several hours. He straightened from his camera sight, rubbed at his eyes, and stretched.

"When we hit that ocean," he said in English, "I'm going to break out the raft, strip naked, and go for a swim, sharks or no . . ."

"*Ta geule*," someone said, "shut up."

The observer looked around, embarrassed at what he'd said. It was as if they were all superstitious, as if talking about Ground, even thinking about it, would bring bad luck. Each of them would have denied this hotly. But for a moment the observer looked as if he would have knocked on wood, had there been a piece of wood in the ship. After a minute the observer pulled out some processed film plates and began examining them through a lens.

Rene Dupert had looked up from his radio console. There was nothing for him to do at the moment. He thought that he would have liked to be in the observer's place, or the navigator's, able to look through one of the periscopes directly into deep space. He had loved the Moon, he had loved to suit up and walk out onto the lunar dust and look upward at the sky, at the stars that did not flicker, at the Magellanic Clouds, close enough to touch. But even there, on the surface of the Moon, he had always been standing on something. He thought of the vacuum that was all around the ship, on every side, just beyond the hull, just beyond the escape hatch behind his back. He wondered what it would be like to look directly into space, standing on nothing, to see not merely a dome of stars, but an entire sphere of them, bright and unblinking. All his life he had wanted to go into space, and all his life he had known that he would. Now he did not want to go back, he wished that he could leave the Earth forever.

The research observer leaned toward the African engineer and began discussing one of the film plates with him. Rene Duport listened to them, only half interested. He thought that the African and the Russian were the only crewmen besides himself

who could speak French without sounding ridiculous.

He saw the pilot abruptly bend over the control panel and make an adjustment. He said something to the Russian that Duport did not catch, the Russian co-pilot nodded and began turning a knob slowly, his eyes on a vernier dial. For several minutes the American and the Russian worked steadily at the controls, frequently glancing at each other. Once the Russian rose to open an access plate in the overhead and inspect some wiring, then he strapped himself in again and continued working his controls. The engineer left his seat and pulled himself forward to begin talking to the pilot in low tone. After a minute the engineer opened a technical manual and began reading off a series of numbers.

The research observer was watching a dial on the cabin wall.

"She's heating up," he said.

Then Rene Duport noticed it. The cabin temperature had risen during the last few minutes, already he was beginning to sweat profusely.

"*C'est trop*," the Russian said. It's too much.

The pilot turned to look back at his crew. "Pile's overheating," he said. "I'm going to blow the cabin pressure so we won't roast. Suit up."

EVERYONE sealed their helmets and plugged into their air supplies. In a few seconds they had each pressurized and tested their suits. The pilot reached for a red lever, and then there was a quick hissing sound that lasted only for a moment.

Rene Duport waited, wondering what was going to happen. Nothing like this had ever happened to the *Quixote*. And the *Prospero* followed the other ship's general design, so that it shouldn't be happening to her either. Both ships used water as a reaction mass, superheated by a nuclear pile, which was separated from the cabin bubble and attached to it only by steel girders. Duport knew what would happen if the overheating didn't stop. Either the pile would blow like a bomb, or those girders would continue conducting heat into the cabin until the cabin walls turned red hot and then melted. Blowing the cabin pressure could only keep the crew from roasting for a few minutes. Perhaps some damping rods had blown out; whatever it was, Duport knew the pile was heating fast.

Over the intercom, Duport could hear the co-pilot muttering, "*Trop vite! Trop vite!*" Too fast, too fast.

"She's going to blow," someone else said.

There was a silence that last-

ed several seconds. Everyone waited.

Then the pilot said, "No good. I'll have to eject."

But Duport did not hear that.

When the temperature was down to normal, the pilot reached for a valve to begin pressurizing. But a safety device prevented the valve from operating, and he looked around to see why. "Christ!" his voice came over the intercom. "He jumped!"

The rest of the crew turned their heads to look toward the rear of the cabin. The escape hatch behind Duport's seat was open, and Duport was gone.

* * *

"But why did he do it?" The research observer lounged against the aft bulkhead, he had been watching a chess game between the Russian and the Finn. The *Prospero* was in orbit, there was little to do now but wait for the ferry ship to lift off from Christmas Island and make rendezvous. After the pilot had ejected the nuclear fuel, the ship had of course simply coasted into orbit. With no power left for course correction, it was not a good orbit, but it was close enough for the ferry to reach. There was nothing to do now but wait, and play chess. The research observer shook his head. "It was stupid, there was no reason. Why did he go out the hatch like that?"

The pilot was tired. He rubbed his face with both hands. He did not want to have to think about it. He looked at the other American's face.

"Nerves. He lost his nerve, that's all."

The research observer watched the Finn capture one of the Russian's rooks with a knight.

"He jumped out of the ship." It was as if he were trying to convince himself that it had really happened. "Why did he do it? I can't figure it out."

The pilot covered his eyes. "Call it cowardice if you like. Or panic. The kid chickened out."

THEN they were in the ferry ship, waiting for the engineers to finish inspecting the *Prospero* before casting off and going into a re-entry spiral, towards the Pacific landing area. Meanwhile, the medic had finished his preliminary physical of each of the crew. Most of the men rested quietly, reading newspapers and waiting. The American pilot had strapped himself to one of the crash couches and taken a short nap. Then he got up to look through a periscope at the three engineers working near the *Prospero's* power tank.

The ferry ship's radioman, a young Englishman, tapped him on the shoulder. The pilot turned away from the eyepiece, and his face was drawn and white.

"They've picked up his track," the radioman said.

"What?"

The radioman handed the pilot a piece of paper. "Just got the news. His suit transmitter, the beacon's working. The station at Leningrad picked up the signal, they're going to compute his orbit."

It was a few seconds before the American understood what he was talking about.

"Duport, you mean? They're tracking him?" He hesitated. "But why? Why are they computing his orbit?"

The Englishman grinned. "They're going to try to pick him up. Rescue him, you know."

The American stared.

"Be a few hours before they have an exact plot," the radioman went on. "The rough estimate is that they'll be ready to launch within forty-six hours. They're going to send up the *Wabash Cannonball*. If his beacon keeps operating, there's a fifty-fifty chance they'll catch him. Just thought you'd want to know, sir. You may not have lost a Corpsman after all." The Englishman turned to go back to his post, and the American stared at his back as he moved away.

"Why?" he whispered. "Why?" The pilot did some rough calculations in his head. He remembered the ship's approximate po-

sition and velocity at the time that Duport had jumped. Duport's body would of course have about the same orbital velocity as that of the ship, though the impetus of his leap would have been enough to carry him into some completely different direction. Somewhere out there Duport was swinging around the Earth in a wide, elliptical orbit. For some reason it had not occurred to the pilot that he might still be alive. Since the moment that he had turned and seen the open hatch he had been thinking of Duport as a casualty, already dead. But in fact, the American realized, Duport was probably still alive. His suit was equipped for just this kind of emergency; it had an oxygen regenerating system that could supply him with air to breathe as long as the photocells kept his battery charged. The catch was that no one had ever lived in a suit before for more than twelve hours at a stretch. Six hours was considered the normal safety limit. In theory the suit would keep Duport alive until he died of thirst or starvation. In theory.

But why were they going to try to rescue him? It made no sense. The *Wabash Cannonball* was the smallest ship in the Space Corps' fleet. It carried a crew of two, and was used for ferrying small cargoes into orbit. If she left behind her re-

serve oxygen tanks and emergency equipment, it should be possible to reduce her weight load sufficiently to get her into an orbit as high as Duport was. Then there was perhaps one chance in ten of getting him down alive. No doubt the Corps Center had decided to send the *Cannonball* up because it would involve the least possible fuel expenditure. But the operation would still cost close to half a million dollars, to say nothing of the risk to the ship and crew. Nothing of the kind had ever been done, or attempted, before. Why had the Corps decided to gamble two lives on a long chance of saving one?

Suddenly the American felt an intense, irrational hatred of Duport. If his suit beacon was operating, it could only be because he had turned it on. Why hadn't he left it off, rather than risk the lives of others to save his own hide? He had jumped ship. They ought to leave him there, the pilot thought.

THE ferry ship broke atmosphere, her heat shield and fins glowing red. She fell to an altitude of ten thousand feet before her velocity fell to a little less than two thousand miles per hour. Then the collapsible wing unfolded like the wing of a moth, it was half wing, half parachute. The ship glided toward the sea.

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It struck the water with an explosion of spray, dived under, bobbed to the surface again, rolling like a porpoise. Someone opened a hatch and climbed out onto the hull. Ten minutes later, the helicopter appeared.

Back at Christmas Island, the American pilot was still asking why. He asked it of Dr. Valdez, a grey-haired man, chief of the spacemedic team.

"You're right," Dr. Valdez said. He was sitting in a chair on the veranda of the infirmary, hands folded behind his head, looking out to sea. "The Center did ask my advice on this matter. I told them what I thought the odds were against a successful rescue operation. I also told them that, for scientific reasons alone, I thought it was worth attempting."

"But why?" The American looked down at him.

Dr. Valdez looked at the sea. "It is now just about twenty-four hours since Duport jumped into space. His beacon is still operating, and the orbital plot has been completed. The rescue ship will launch in about thirty hours from now. Estimating six hours between lift-off and rendezvous, this means that Duport will have been alone in space for a total of about sixty hours. Two and a half days."

The American said nothing, waiting for him to go on.

"Think of him up there." Dr. Valdez closed his eyes. "Completely alone. Total silence except for the sound of his own breathing. He sees nothing but stars, intensely bright, above him, beneath his feet, on all sides, the silver smear of the Milky Way, the Clouds of Magellan, the nebulae. The Earth is a great, swollen balloon that swings past his field of vision now and then, the Moon a smaller bubble. Without a reference point there is no sense of depth, no perspective. He can reach out and touch the stars. He swings in space, beyond time and distance, completely alone."

"So what?" the pilot said at last.

Dr. Valdez straightened in his chair and leaned his elbows on his knees.

"So there are some things we—I—would like to know. I'd like to know what is happening to him, out there. What he has seen, perhaps heard. The effects on his body, if any. Above all, the effect on his mind. No human being has ever experienced anything like it before. There's something else I'd like to know. We worked with him for nearly a year. He finished with the highest rating in his class. We never would have sent him out if we hadn't been sure about him. But somewhere we made a mistake, there was something we failed to see. I'd

like to know what made him jump."

This time the American looked out to sea. He was silent.

The doctor took out an old briar pipe and began filling it from a leather pouch. "Strange. His radio beacon is functioning normally. There's no reason why his transmitter and receiver shouldn't be working too. Yet we've been trying to contact him by means of voice communication, and he doesn't answer. Maybe he's dead already. There's no way to tell."

"Do you think he's worth saving?" the pilot asked after a minute.

"I'd like to know why he jumped."

IN the briefing room, the American listened intently to the sounds coming from the speaker. Dr. Valdez and the other members of the *Prospero*'s crew also listened. Dr. Valdez listened with his eyes closed, drawing slowly on his pipe.

"Orbital ship *Wabash Cannonball* acknowledging Azores transmission," the voice said. "Our condition is still AOK, repeat, condition is still normal. We are still tracking survival beacon. Range, 10,000 kilometers and closing." There was another burst of radio noise that momentarily drowned out the voice. The men in the briefing room

had been listening for nearly six hours now. Occasionally one of them would go out for coffee or fresh air, but he always returned within a few minutes. The American pilot had not moved from his place since lift-off. Outside, it had begun to rain.

"At last, the critical moment came.

"Range is now five hundred kilometers and closing," the voice said. "I now have a visual sight. Repeat. I have a visual sight. I can see him. Switching from computer to manual control." Several minutes of silence. The pilot was jockeying closer to Duport, making delicate adjustments in his ship's orbital path. He had a small target. A single wrong judgement could cause him to drift hundreds of kilometers off course, wasting a critical amount of fuel.

At last the report came, "Range is now five hundred meters. We are suiting up and blowing cabin pressure. Stand by for further transmission." Ten minutes passed. The crew was too busy to broadcast now. The rain drummed softly on the roof of the briefing room and ran in slow curtains down the windowpanes.

Finally the voice came on the air again.

"Orbital ship *Wabash Cannonball* resuming transmission. Rescue operation is successful.

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Repeat, operation is successful. We have him aboard. He's alive."

The American pilot looked up at the faces around him. Dr. Valdez was rubbing his mouth thoughtfully. The other men stared at the speaker with blank looks. The American noted that no one was cheering.

LATER, the pilot of the *Cannonball* described the rescue. When he had first reported his visual sighting, he had been seeing the sunlight reflected from the surface of Duport's suit. Duport was a white spark, shining out among the stars like a meteor or nova. The sight had given the rescue pilot a peculiar feeling, he mentioned later, seeing this blue-white star slowly growing in the sky until it was brighter than Venus, seeing this new star rise, a point of white fire, and knowing the star was a man.

Then they had suited up and blown the cabin pressure. The co-pilot had gone out the hatch while the pilot remained at his controls. Watching through the periscope, he could see Duport spread-eagled against the sky, the left side of his body a glare of sunlight, the right side in shadow. Duport had not moved his arms or legs since they had first seen him, neither did he acknowledge with his suit transmitter. He was about five hundred meters from the ship and

drifting slowly closer. The co-pilot tethered himself to the hull, then tossed out a line with a magnetic grapple on its end. He missed, hauled in, and tossed again. On the third try the end of the line passed within half a meter of Duport's body. Duport moved his arm, took the end of the line, and hooked it to his belt. The co-pilot hauled him in.

* * *

ABOUT a month later, the American pilot saw Rene Duport for the first time since he had jumped from the *Prospero*. It was at the space medicine laboratories at Walter Reed.

Dr. Valdez stood near the window, looking down at the sunlit lawn. In the shade of a tall shrub a man was sitting in a lawn chair, his head back, completely relaxed. He wore a blue denim hospital uniform. His back was to the window.

"Physically he was in good condition when they brought him down," the doctor said, "except for a slight case of dehydration."

"Can I talk to him?" the pilot asked.

Dr. Valdez looked at him sharply, as if surprised by the request.

"You can talk to him if you like. But he won't answer you."

The pilot followed the doctor out of the room and down to the lawn. They came up from be-

hind the lawn chair and stood looking down at the man sitting in it. His eyes were closed.

The pilot saw that Duport's jaw was slack. He could not tell whether he was asleep. The flesh in his cheeks was sunken. He looked older.

Dr. Valdez said, "Catatonia, schizophrenia, it's like no condition I've ever seen before. He is perfectly aware of what is going on around him, you see. Bring him food and he eats. Stick him with a pin and he jumps. All his responses are normal. He took the cable and attached it himself, remember. But he will make no more than the minimum necessary effort to survive." The doctor chewed his lip, thinking. "If only he would say something."

"Have you decided why he jumped?" the pilot asked, not realizing that he was whispering. "What made him panic?"

"No." The doctor shook his head. "Not panic, it wasn't fear alone, I think. There was something else. We put him through equally critical moments in training, and he didn't panic then. Fear was part of it, but there was something else too."

"Well, what then?"

"I don't know the word. It's something new. Maybe Duport is a new kind of human being. If not fear, call it—love, or desire. He jumped into space be-

cause, I think, he wanted to."

"I don't understand that," the pilot said.

"I don't either—yet." Dr. Valdez moved a step closer to the man in the chair. "Rene. Rene Duport."

Without moving his head, Duport opened his eyes.

"Stand up."

Duport got up and stood looking at some point half way between the two men. His eyes no longer glistened.

"It's as if something has gone out of him," the doctor said.

"Do you know who I am?" the pilot asked. Rene Duport turned his head until the pupils of his eyes were pointed at the American's face. But his eyes did not seem to focus on him. Rather they were focused at some point far beyond him.

"Why did you jump?" the pilot said. Moving a step closer, he looked into the blank, dull eyes, that continued looking through him, focussed on some strange horizon. The eyes no

longer seemed blue, but light grey. The pilot tried to remember where he had seen eyes like that before. Then he remembered one day, years before, when he had looked down into the open eyes of a dead man. He shuddered and turned away.

"If only he would talk," the doctor said.

The pilot had turned his back on Duport. "Why? If he could talk, what would *you* ask him?"

It was two or three minutes before the doctor answered.

"I would ask him what it feels like to be a star."

And as the two men walked away, Rene Duport remained standing where they left him. He was watching. The pupils of his eyes never shifted, but he was always watching. The Earth, a swollen balloon, floated past his field of vision. Slowly his right arm rose until his arm was horizontal from his shoulder. Then the corners of his mouth lifted in a faint smile, as his fingers touched the Clouds of Magellan.

THE END



FAR ENOUGH TO TOUCH



G. Barr - 1960

DEAD WORLD

By JACK DOUGLAS

Illustrated by BARR

Out on the ice-buried planet, Commander Red Stone led his Free Companions to almost certain death. They died for a dangerous dream that had only one chance in a thousand trillion to come true. Is there a better reason for dying?

... although the most recent star to die, RNAC 89778 in the distant Menelaus galaxy (common name, Menelaus XII), had eight inhabited planets, only some one thousand people of the fifth planet escaped and survived as a result of a computer error which miscalculated the exact time by two years. Due to basic psycho-philo maladjustments the refugees of Menelaus XII-5 are classified as anti-social-types-B-6 and must be considered unstable. All anti-social-types-B-6 are barred from responsible positions in United Galaxies by order of the Inter-Galactic Council.

—Short History of The United Galaxies

YUAN ALTARIO started it. He was serving in my Company and he was one of them. A Menelaus XII-5 "unstable," and don't ever call that damned little planet by its number if you meet one of them. They call it Nova-Maurania. But you won't meet one of them. Or maybe you will, maybe they did make it. I like to think they did.

There were a lot of them in the Companies in 3078. Restless men. The Companies were the logical place for them. We're still classified anti-social-B-6, too. Every year it's harder to get recruits, but we still have to be careful who we take in. We took Yuan Saltario. There was something

about him from the very start.

"Why do you want to join a Free Company?" He was a short, humanoid type with deep black eyes and a thin, lipless mouth that never smiled.

"I'm an anti-social. I like to fight. I want to fight."

"A misfit joining the misfits? A grudge against the Council? It's not good enough, mister, we live on the Council. Try again."

Saltario's black eyes stared without a flicker. "You're Red Stone, Commander of the Red Company. You hate the Council and I hate the Council. You're the . . ." Saltario stopped.

I said, "The traitor of the Glorious War of Survival. You can say it, Saltario."

The lipless mouth was rigid. "I don't think of it that way. I think of a man with personal integrity," Saltario said.

I suppose I should have seen it then, the rock he carried deep inside him. It might have saved thirty thousand good men. But I was thinking of myself. Commander Red Stone of the Red Company, Earthmen. Only we're not all Earthmen now, every year there are fewer recruits, and it won't be long before we die out and the Council will have the last laugh. Old Red Stone, the Traitor of the War of Survival, the little finger of my left hand still missing and telling the Universe I was a very old soldier of the out-

lawed Free Companies hanging onto life on a rocky planet of the distant Salaman galaxy. Back at the old stand because United Galaxies still need us. In a way it's a big joke. Two years after Rajay-Ben and I had a bellyfull of the Glorious War of Survival and they chased us all the way out here, they turned right around and made the peace. A joke on me, but sometimes I like to think that our runout was the thing that made them think and make peace. When you've been a soldier for thirty-five years you like to win battles, but you like to feel you helped bring peace, too.

I said, "Personal integrity. That sounds pretty good, doesn't it. So you like personal integrity? All right, Saltario, are you sure you know what you're getting into? We're 60 million light years from Galaxy Center, 10 million from the nearest United Galaxy city. We've got no comforts, no future, nothing to do but fight. A woman in her right mind won't look at us, if they see you in uniform they'll spit on you, if they catch you out of uniform they'll kill you."

Saltario shrugged. "I like to eat. I've got nowhere to go. All I've got is myself and a big piece of ice I called home."

I nodded. "Okay. We fight small wars for good profits. It's not Earth out here, but we've got

four nice suns, plenty of Lukanian whisky Rajay-Ben taught the locals to make, and we're our own masters. The United Galaxies leaves us pretty much alone unless they need us. You do your job, and your job is what I tell you to do, period. You got that straight?"

Saltario very nearly smiled. "It sounds good to me, sir."

"I hope it'll sound good in a year, Saltario, because once you're in you don't get out except feet first. Is that clear? I have life and death rights over you. You owe allegiance to the Red Company and me and to no one else. Got that? Today your best friends are the men of Rajay-Ben's Lukanian Fourth Free Patrol, and your worst enemies are the men of Mandasiva's Syrian O Company. Tomorrow Rajay-Ben's boys may be your worst enemies, and Mandasiva's troops your best friends. It all depends on the contract. A Company on the same contract is a friend, a Company against the contract is an enemy. You'll drink with a man today, and kill him tomorrow. Got it? If you kill a Free Companion without a contract you go to court-martial: If you kill a citizen of the United Galaxies except in a battle under contract I throw you to the wolves and that means you're finished. That's the way it is."

"Yes sir." Saltario never

moved a muscle. He was rigid.

"Right. I said, "get your gear, see the Adjutant and sign the agreement. I think you'll do."

Saltario left. I sat back in my chair and thought about how many non-Earthmen I was taking into the Company. Maybe I should have been thinking about this one single non-Earthman and the something he was carrying inside him, but I didn't, and it cost the Companies thirty thousand men we couldn't afford to lose. We can't afford to lose one man. There are only a hundred Companies now, twenty thousand men each, give or take a few thousand depending on how the last contract went. Life is good in the United Galaxies now that they've disarmed and outlawed all war again, and our breed is dying out faster than it did in the 500 years of peace before the War of Survival. Too many of the old Companions like me went west in the War of Survival. The Galactic Council know they need us, know that you can't change all living creatures into good Galactic citizens overnight, so they let us go on fighting for anyone in the Universe who wants to take something from someone else, or who thinks someone else wants to take something from him. And even the mighty United Galaxies needs guards for expeditions to the unexplored galaxies. But they don't

like us and they don't want us. They don't cut off our little fingers anymore, but we have to wear our special black uniforms when we go into United territory under penalty of a quick death. Humane, of course, they just put us to sleep gently and for keeps. And they've got a stockpile of ionic bombs ready at all times in case we get out of hand. We don't have ionic weapons, that's part of the agreement and they watch us. They came close to using them down there in the frozen waste of Menelaus XII, but thirty thousand of us died without ionics. We killed each other. They liked that, even if they didn't like what happened.

Do you know what it means to be lost? Really lost? I'm lost, if that means I know I'll never go back to live on Earth. But I know that Earth is still there to go back to, and I can dream of going home. Yuan Saltario and the other refugees have no home to go back to. They can't even dream. They sat in that one ship that escaped and watched their planet turn into a lifeless ball of ice that would circle dead and frozen forever around its burned-out star. A giant tomb that carried under its thick ice their homes and their fields and their loves. And they could not even hope and dream. Or I did not think they could.

Saltario had been with us a year when we got the contract to escort the survey mission to Nova-Maurania. A private Earth commercial mining firm looking for minerals under the frozen wastes of the dead planet. Rajay-Ben was in on the contract. We took two battalions, one from my Red Company, and one from Rajay-Ben's Lukanian Patrol. My Sub-Commander was Pete Colenso, old Mike Colenso's boy. It all went fine for a week or so, routine guard and patrol. The survey team wouldn't associate with us, of course, but we were used to that. We kept our eyes open and our mouths shut. That's our job, and we give value for money received. So we were alert and ready. But it wasn't the attack that nearly got us this time. It was the cold of the dead planet lost in absolute zero and absolute darkness.

Nova-Maurania was nearly 40 percent uranium, and who could resist that? A Centaurian trading unit did not resist the lure. The attack was quick and hard. A typical Lukanian Patrol attack. My Company was pinned down at the first volley from those damned smoky blasters of the Lukaniens. All I could see was the same shimmering lights I had learned to know so well in the War of Survival against Lukania. Someday maybe I'll find out how to see a Lukan, Rajay-

Ben has worked with me a long time to help, but when the attack came this time all I could do was eat ice and beam a help call to Rajay-Ben. That Centaurian trading unit was a cheap outfit, they had hired only one battalion of Arjay-Ben's Ninth Lukanian Free Patrol, and Rajay-Ben flanked them right off that planet. I got my boys on their feet and we chased Arjay's men half way back to Salaman with Rajay-Ben laughing like a hyena the whole way.

"Dip me in mud, Red boy, I'd give a prime contract for one gander at old Arjay-Ben's face. He's blowing a gasket!"

I said, "Nice flank job."

Rajay-Ben laughed so hard I could see his pattern of colored light shaking like a dancing rainbow. "I took two Sub-Commanders, wait'll I hit that bullet-head for ransom!"

Then we stopped laughing. We had won the battle, but Arjay-Ben was a crafty old soldier and his sabotage squad had wrecked our engines and our heating units. We were stuck on a frozen planet without heat.

Young Colenso turned white. "What do we do?"

I said, "Beam for help and pray we don't freeze first."

They had missed our small communications reactor unit. We sent out our call, and we all

huddled around the small reactor. There might be enough heat out of it to let us live five hours. If we were lucky. It was the third hour when Yuan Saltario began to talk. Maybe it was the nearness of death.

"I was twenty-two. Portario was the leader on our planet. He found the error when we had one ship ready. We had three days. No time to get the other ships ready. He said we were lucky, the other planets didn't have even one ship ready. Not even time for United Galaxies to help. Portario chose a thousand of us to go. I was one. At first I felt very good, you know? I was really happy. Until I found out that my wife couldn't go. Not fit enough. United Galaxies had beamed the standards to us. Funny how you don't think about other people until something hurts you. I'd been married a year. I told them it was both of us or neither of us. I told Portario to tell United Galaxies they couldn't break up a family and to hell with their standards. They laughed at me. Not Portario, the Council. What did they care. they would just take another man. My wife begged me to go. She cried so much I had to agree to go. I loved her too much to be able to stay and see the look on her face as we both died when she knew I could have gone. On the ship before we took off I stood at a port and looked

down at her. A small girl trying to smile at me. She waved once before they led her away from the rocket. All hell was shaking the planet already, had been for months, but all I saw was a small girl waving once, just once. She's still here, somewhere down there under the ice."

The cold was slowly creeping into us. It was hard to move my mouth, but I said, "She loved you, she wanted you to live."

"Without her, without my home, I'm as dead as the planet. I feel frozen. She's like that dead sun out there, and I'll circle around her until someone gets me and ends it." Saltario seemed to be seeing something. "I'm beginning to forget what she looked like. I don't want to forget! I can't forget her on this planet. The way it was! It was a beautiful place, perfect! I don't want to forget her!"

Colenso said, "You won't have long to remember."

But Colenso was wrong. My Third Battalion showed up when we had just less than an hour to live. They took us off. The Earth mining outfit haggled over the contract because the job had not been finished and I had to settle for two-third contract price. Rajay-Ben did better when he ransomed Arjay-Ben's two Sub-Commanders. It wasn't a bad deal and I would have been satis-

fied, except that something had happened to Yuan Saltario.

Maybe it made him realize that he did not want to die after all. Or maybe it turned him space-happy and he began to dream. A dream of his own born up there in the cold of his dead planet. A dream that nearly cost me my Company.

I did not know what that dream was until Saltario came into my office a year later. He had a job for the Company.

"How many men?" I asked.

"Our Company and Rajay-Ben's Patrol," Saltario said.

"Full strength?"

"Yes sir."

"Price?"

"Standard, sir," Saltario said. "The party will pay."

"Just a trip to your old planet?"

"That's all," Saltario said. "A guard contract. The hiring party just don't want any interference with their project."

"Two full Companies? Forty thousand men? They must expect to need a lot of protecting."

"United Galaxies opposes the project. Or they will if they get wind of it."

I said, "United opposes a lot of things, what's special about this scheme?"

Saltario hesitated, then looked at me with those flat black eyes. "Ionics."

It's not a word you say, or

hear, without a chill somewhere deep inside. Not even me and I know a man can survive ionic weapons. I know because I did once. Weapons so powerful I'm one of the last men alive who saw them in action. Mathematically the big ones could wipe out a Galaxy. I saw a small one destroy a star in ten seconds. I watched Saltario for a long time. It seemed a long time, anyway. It was probably twenty seconds. I was wondering if he had gone space-crazy for keeps. And I was thinking of how I could find out what it was all about in time to stop it.

I said, "A hundred Companies won't be enough. Saltario, have you ever seen or heard what an ionic bomb can . . . ?"

Saltario said, "Not weapons, peaceful power."

"Even that's out and you know it," I said. "United Galaxies won't even touch peaceful ionics, too dangerous to even use."

"You can take a look first."

"A good look," I said.

I alerted Rajay-Ben and we took two squads and a small ship and Saltario directed us to a tall mountain that jutted a hundred feet above the ice of Nova-Maurania. I was not surprised. In a way I think I knew from the moment Saltario walked into my office. Whatever it was Saltario was part of it. And I had a pretty good idea what it was. The only

question was how. But I didn't have time to think it out any farther. In the Companies you learn to feel danger.

The first fire caught four of my men. Then I was down on the ice. They were easy to see. Black uniforms with white wedges. Pete O'Hara's White Wedge Company, Earthmen. I don't like fighting other Earthmen, but a job's a job and you don't ask questions in the Companies. It looked like a full battalion against our two squads. On the smooth ice surface there was no cover except the jutting mountain top off to the right. And no light in the absolute darkness of a dead star. But we could see through our viewers, and so could they. They outnumbered us ten to one. Rajay-Ben's voice came through the closed circuit.

"Bad show, Red, they got our pants down!"

"You call it," I answered.

"Break silence!"

Surrender. When a Company breaks silence in a battle it means surrender. There was no other way. And I had a pretty good idea that the Council itself was behind O'Hara on this job. If it was ionics involved, they wouldn't ransom us. The Council had waited a long time to catch Red Stone in an execution offense. They wouldn't miss.

But forty of our men were down already.

"Okay," I beamed over the circuit, "break silence. We've had it Rajay."

"Council offense, Red."

"Yeah."

Well, I'd had a lot of good years. Maybe I'd been a soldier too long. I was thinking just like that when the sudden flank attack started. From the right. Heavy fire from the cover of the solitary mountain top. O'Hara's men were dropping. I stared through my viewer. On that mountain I counted the uniforms of twenty-two different Companies. That was very wrong. Whoever Saltario was fronting for could not have the power or the gold to hire twenty-four Companies including mine and Rajay-Ben's. And the fire was heavy but not that heavy. But whoever they were they were very welcome. We had a chance now. And I was making my plans when the tall old man stood up on the small, jutting top of that mountain. The tall old man stood up and a translating machine boomed out.

"All of you! O'Hara's men! Look at this!"

I saw it. In a beam of light on the top of that mountain it looked like a small neutron-source machine. But it wasn't. It was an ionic beam projector.

The old man said, "Go home."

They went. They went fast and silent. And I knew where they

were going. Not to Salaman. O'Hara would have taken one look at that machine and be half way to United Galaxy Center before he had stopped seeing it. I felt like taking that trip myself. But I had agreed to look and I would look. If we were lucky we would have forty-eight hours to look and run.

I fell in what was left of my Company behind the men that had saved us. More Company uniforms than I had ever seen in one place. They said nothing. Just walked into a hole in that mountain. Into a cave. And in the cave, at the far end, a door opened. An elevator. We followed the tall old man into the elevator and it began to descend. The elevator car went down for a long time. At last I could see a faint glow far below. The glow grew brighter and the car stopped. Far below the glow was still brighter. We all stepped out into a long corridor cut from solid rock. I estimated that we were at least two hundred miles down and the glow was hundreds of miles deeper. We went through three sealed doors and emerged into a vast room. A room bright with light and filled with more men in Company uniforms, civilians, even women. At least a thousand. And I saw it. The thousand refugees, all of them. Gathered from all the Companies, from wherever they had been in the Galaxies. Gath-

ered here in a room two hundred miles into the heart of their dead planet. A room filled with giant machines. Ionic machines. Highly advanced ionic power reactors.

The old man stood in front of his people and spoke. "I am Jason Portario, I thank you for coming."

I broke in, "Ionic power is an execution offense. You know that. How the hell did you get all this . . . ?"

"I know the offense, Commander," Portario said, "and I know you. You're a fair man. You're a brave man. It doesn't matter where we got the power, many men are dead to get it, but we have it, and we will keep it. We have a job to do."

I said, "After that stunt out there you've about as much chance as a snowball in hell. O'Hara's half way to Galaxy Center. Look, with a little luck we get you out to Salaman. If you leave all this equipment I might be able to hide you until it blows over."

The old man shrugged. "I would have preferred not to show our hand, but we had to save you. I was aware that the Council would find us out sooner or later, they missed the ionic material a month ago. But that is unimportant. The important matter is will you take our job? All we need is another two days, per-

haps three. Can you hold off an attack for that long?"

"Why?" I asked.

Portario smiled. "All right, Commander, you should know all we plan. Sit down, and let me finish before you speak."

I sat. Rajay-Ben sat. The agitation of his colored lights showed that he was as disturbed as I was. The thousand Nova-Mauranians stood there in the room and watched us. Yuan Saltario stood with his friends. I could feel his eyes on me. Hot eyes. As if something inside that lost man was burning again. Portario lighted a pipe. I had not seen a pipe since I was a child. The habit was classified as ancient usage in the United Galaxies. Portario saw me staring. He held his pipe and looked at it.

"In a way, Commander," the old man said, "this pipe is my story. On Nova-Maurania we liked a pipe. We liked a lot of the old habits. Maybe we should have died with all the others. You know, I was the one who found the error. Sometimes I'm not at all sure my friends here thank me for it. Our planet is dead, Commander, and so are we. We're dead inside. But we have a dream. We want to live again. And to live again our planet must live again." The old man paused as if trying to be sure of telling it right. "We mean no harm to anyone. All we want is our life back.

We don't want to live forever like lumps of ice circling around a dead heart. What we plan may kill us all, but we feel it is worth the risk. We have thousands of ionic power reactors. We have blasted out venturi tubes. We found life still deep in the center of this planet. It is all ready now. With all the power we have we will break the hold of our dead sun and send this planet off into space! We . . ."

I said, "You're insane! It can't . . ."

"But it can, Commander. It's a great risk, yes, but it can be done, my calculations are perfect! We want to leave this dead system, go off into space and find a new star that will bring life back to our planet! A green, live, warm Nova-Maurania once again!"

Rajay-Ben was laughing. "That's the craziest damned dream I ever sat still for. You know what your chances of being picked up by another star are? Picked up just right? Why . . ."

Portario said, "We have calculated the exact initial thrust, the exact tangential velocity, the precise orbital path we need. If all goes exactly, I emphasize, *exactly*, to the last detail as we have planned it we can do it! Our chances of being caught by the correct star in the absolutely correct position are one in a thou-

sand trillion, but we can do it!"

It was so impossible I began to believe he was right. "If you aren't caught just right?"

Portario's black eyes watched me. "We could burn up or stay frozen and lifeless. We could drift in space forever as cold and dead as we are now and our ionic power won't last forever. The forces we will use could blow the planet apart. But we are going to try. We would rather die than live as walking dead men in this perfect United Galaxies we do not want."

The silence in the room was like a Salaman fog. Thick silence broken only by the steady hum of the machines deep beneath us in the dead planet. A wild, impossible dream of one thousand lost souls. A dream that would destroy them, and they did not care. There was something about it all that I liked.

I said, "Why not get Council approval?"

Portario smiled. "Council has little liking for wild dreams, Commander. It would not be considered as advancing the future of United Galaxies' destiny. Then there are the ionics." And Portario hesitated. "And there is the danger of imbalance, Galactic imbalance. I have calculated carefully, the danger is remote, but Council is not going to take even a remote chance."

Yuan Saltario broke in. "All they care about is their damned sterile destiny! They don't care about people. Well we do! We care about something to live for. The hell with the destiny of the Galaxies! They don't know, and we'll be gone before they do know."

"They know plenty now. O'Hara's beamed them in."

"So we must hurry," Portario said. "Three days Commander, will you protect us for three days?"

A Council offense punishable by instant destruction with United Galaxies reserve ionic weapons in the hands of the super-secret police and disaster teams. And three days is a long time. I would be risking my whole Company. I heard Rajay-Ben laugh.

"Blast me, Red, it's so damned crazy I'm for it. Let's give it a shot."

I did not know then how much it would really cost us. If I had I might not have agreed. Or maybe I would have, it was good to know people could still have such dreams in our computer age.

"Okay," I said, "beam the full Companies and try to get one more. Mandasiva's Sirian boys would be good. We'll split the fee three ways."

Yuan Saltario said, "Thanks, Red."

I said, "Thank me later, if we're still around."

We beamed the Companies and in twenty minutes they were on their way Straight into the biggest trouble we had had since the War of Survival. I expected trouble, but I didn't know how much. Pete Colenso tipped me off.

Pete spoke across the light years on our beam. "Mandasiva says okay if we guarantee the payment. I've deposited the bond with him and we're on our way. But Red, something's funny."

"What?"

"This place is empty. The whole damned galaxy out here is like a desert. Every Company has moved out somewhere."

"Okay," I beamed, "get rolling fast."

There was only one client who could hire all the Companies at one time. United Galaxies itself. We were in for it. I had expected perhaps ten Companies, not three against 97, give or take a few out on other jobs. It gave me a chill. Not the odds, but if Council was that worried maybe there was bad danger. But I'd given my word and a Companion keeps his word. We had one ace in the hole, a small one. If the other Companies were not here in Menelaus yet, they must have rendezvoused at Galaxy Center. It was the kind of "follow-the-book" mistake United would make. It gave us a day and a half. We would need it.

They came at dawn on the sec-

ond day. We were deployed across five of the dead planets of Menelaus XII in a ring around Nova-Maurania. They came fast and hard, and Portario and his men had at least ten hours work left before they could fire their reactors and pray. Until then we did the praying. It didn't help.

Mandasiva's command ship went at the third hour. A Lukan blaster got it. By the fourth hour I had watched three of my sub-command ships go. A Sirian force beam got one, an Earth fusion gun got another, and the third went out of action and rammed O'Hara's command ship that had been leading their attack against us. That third ship of mine was Pete Colenso's. Old Mike would have been proud of his boy. I was sick. Pete had been a good boy. So had O'Hara. Not a boy, O'Hara, but the next to the last of old Free Companion from Earth. I'm the last, and I said a silent good-bye to O'Hara. By the sixth hour Rajay-Ben had only ten ships left. I had twelve. Five thousand of my men were gone. Eight thousand of Rajay-Ben's Lukans. The Sirian's of Mandasiva's O Company were getting the worst of it, and in the eighth hour Mandasiva's second in command surrendered. It would be over soon, too soon. And the dream would be over with the battle. I broke silence.

"Red Stone calling. Do you

read me? Commander Stone calling. Request conference. Repeat, request conference."

A face appeared on the inter-Company beam screen. The cold, blank, hard-bitten face of the only Free Company Commander senior to me now that O'Hara was gone, Jake Compesino of the Cygne Black Company. "Are you surrendering, Stone?"

"No. I want to speak to my fellow Companions."

Campesino's voice was like ice. "Violation! You know the rules. Stone. Silence cannot be broken in battle. I will bring charges. You're through, Stone."

I said, "Okay, crucify me later. But hear me now."

Campesino said, "Close silence or surrender."

It was no good. We'd had it. And across the distance of battle Rajay-Ben's face appeared on the screen. The colored lights that were a Lukan's face and I knew enough to know that the shimmering lights were mad. "The hell with them, Red, let's go all the damned way!"

And a new face appeared on the screen. A face I knew too well. First Councillor Roark. "Stone! You've done a lot in your day but this is the end, you hear me? You're defending a madman in a Council crime. Do you realize the risk? Universal imbalance! The whole pattern of galaxies could be destroyed! We'll

destroy you for this, Stone. An ionic project without Council authorization."

I said to Campesino, "Five minutes, Commander. That's all."

There was a long blank on the screen, then Campesino's cold face appeared. "Okay, Red, talk. I don't like civilian threats. You've got your five minutes, make it good."

I made it good. I told them of a handful of people who had a dream. A handful of people who wanted their home back. A few lost souls who would rather die trying to live the way they wanted to live than go on living in a world they did not want. And I told them of the great United Galaxies, that had been created to protect the dreams of everyone in it and had forgotten why it had been created. I told them that it did not matter who was right or wrong, because when a man can no longer dream something has gone wrong in the Universe. When I finished, Cam-

pesino's face was impassive.

Campesino said, "You heard Commander Stone, men. Close off, Stone. Give me a minute to get the vote."

I waited. It was the longest minute of my life.

"You win, Red," Campesino said. He was smiling at me. "Go home, Councillor, battle's over."

The Councillor went. He said there would be hell to pay, and maybe there will be, but I don't think so, they still need us. We lost thirty thousand good men in all the Companies. But when the next dawn came Nova-Maurania was gone. I don't know where they went, or what happened to them. Here in my stronghold I sometimes imagine them safe and rebuilding a green world where they can smoke pipes and live their own lives. And sometimes I imagine them all dead and drifting out there in the infinity of space. I don't think they would mind too much, either way.

THE END





The trick cigar blew Carter's chance for success
right out the window.

INHERITANCE

By O. H. LESLIE

A world turned sterile. No more infants. Gradual depopulation. Thus did science face its greatest challenge. Alfred Millsong was a scientist and he solved the problem; but only to be faced with a bigger one: Who would he permit to inherit the earth?

THE counterman flopped the dirty cloth between Arthur Millsong's elbows. Arthur cleared his throat, and repeated his question with a little more assertion.

"I said, wasn't that a five I gave you?"

"Look, mister." The counterman squeezed the rag over the sink and glared. "Coffee and doughnut's two bits. You give me a one. I give you seventy-five cents."

"I thought it was a five." No, Arthur said to himself, I know it was a five.

The counterman frowned. "Maybe you'd like to see the manager."

"Oh, no!" said Arthur quickly. He couldn't afford a scene, even in a place like this. There were Chemco people here probably, having

their morning coffee just like himself.

"My mistake, I guess," he said, forcing a smile. He picked up his cup and gulped the rest of the coffee down. It was still too hot, and he grimaced as the steaming liquid hit his throat. He picked up his change, hesitated, and then decided to leave the usual dime.

As he entered the revolving doors that turned into the wide, cool lobby of the United Chemical Building, he did some rapid figuring. Quarter for coffee, a dime tip, sixty-five cents out of a five-dollar-bill—that meant he was out four dollars and thirty-five cents. Plus the fact that he had taken a cab to work that morning after oversleeping—

let's see, that was a dollar and a half, plus sixty-five cents—

"Hey, Millsong!"

It was Big Carter, one of the two filial executive heads of the company. He was at the building newsstand, wearing the white shorts that were, in Arthur's view at least, pretty ridiculous for a grown man. But nobody every snickered behind Big Carter's back.

"Want a paper?"

"No thanks," said Arthur.

"Interesting reading these days," said Carter, walking towards the elevators. Arthur stepped up manfully to his side, but couldn't match his long-legged stride. "Big obstetrical meeting in Ottawa," Carter continued, reading as he walked. "Bet those guys are *really* worried." He chuckled.

"It's quite a problem," said Arthur tentatively.

"Not for me, boy!" Carter laughed loudly. "I got all the kids I can use. You met my Ralphie, didn't you?"

"Yes." Arthur recalled the meeting, and the memory was painful. Ralphie was a big boy of thirteen, and Big Carter had dramatized his size by a laughing comparison with Arthur's own five-feet-six.

"And as for grandchildren—well, I'm not ready for that

yet!" Carter guffawed as he entered the elevator and nodded to the operator. The operator tipped his cap in deference to the executive, but didn't seem to even notice the presence of the researcher.

"Yes, sir," said Carter, rocking on his heels as the elevator shot upwards to the Chemco Research Laboratory on the 34th floor. "My little family circle is complete, Arthur. But you're a slow starter, aren't you, boy?" He nudged Arthur in the short ribs. "Ought to get yourself a *frau*, Mister Millsong. Stop running around with those wild women of yours."

"Me?" Arthur gasped. "Why, I never—"

"Come on, come on," Big Carter winked. "I heard about those wild parties you go to—"

"It's just a club," protested Arthur. "Just a friendly little social club. But they're all nice people—"

"Sure, sure!"

The elevator stopped and the two men got out. In parting, Carter stunned Arthur with a blow on the back that almost toppled him off his feet. The big man meant it to be friendly, of course. It was his mark of camaraderie, of good personnel relations. But as Arthur Millsong went into

the air-cooled laboratory and exchanged his street jacket for an antiseptic white smock, he wondered: Why does he have to hit me so hard?

The morning hours went quickly. Arthur became absorbed in the tricky business of isolating amino acids. These undisturbed moments in the laboratory were peaceful ones for Arthur. The cheerful bubble of fluids in the retorts, the hiss of the Bunsen burners, the far-off murmurings of traffic noises in the street below—these were sounds of contentment, lulling him into that good feeling of usefulness and security.

Then, at eleven o'clock, the loudspeaker crackled, and the crisp voice of Miss Dana sounded through the room, calling for a meeting of the research staff. This was a sound that Arthur didn't like at all.

With a sigh, he removed his smock, replaced his coat, and followed the other staff members down the corridor and into the impressive office of Hugo Redbush, Research Supervisor.

Redbush looked mysterious. Redbush always looked mysterious, with his heavy black eyebrows and piercing, myopic gaze. But this time, there

was an intensified air of secrecy about the way he nodded them into the chairs surrounding his desk.

"How are you, Millsong?" he asked, embarrassing Arthur by singling him out for attention.

"Fine, Mr. Redbush."

"Keeping busy?"

"Yes, sir. I'm working with Mr. Hinton's protein group."

"Do you enjoy working with Mr. Hinton's protein?"

Mr. Hinton, a tall cadaverous man with a solemn face, broke out into an unexpected giggle. It became the signal for general amusement among the researchers, and Arthur shifted uncomfortably in his chair.

"What about that, Mr. Hinton? Taking our Arthur under your wing?"

"Trying to, Mr. Redbush," smirked Hinton, winking at Miss Culver, the lab assistant.

"See if you can get him out of his shell, will you," smiled Mr. Redbush. "Maybe mix him up a batch of monkey glands."

They all laughed again, Miss Culver so hysterically that she had to wipe the tears from her eyes with a tissue. Arthur joined in the merriment with a weak smile, but the point of all the humor escaped him.

Then Redbush's plastic features melted into sternness.

"Well!" he said. "That's enough of that. Now we've got business to talk over. Serious business."

The researchers looked serious.

"Here," said Redbush, picking up a bound manuscript from his desk, "is a secret and confidential report from the front office." He held it across the desk towards Arthur. He automatically reached out for it, but Redbush jerked it back.

"Uh-uh," he said. "I said secret and confidential. But it concerns all of us and the work we're doing."

He placed the volume on his desk and arose. He walked to the wall, and pulled down the glossy black chart with its complex diagrams of the carbon atom with closed-chain and open-chain compounds. It was a handsome chart, and Redbush was proud of it. But it seemed to have no actual bearing on the subject at hand.

"You've all been reading the papers, no doubt," the supervisor said. "You know what Topic A is these days. What you *don't* know, perhaps, is how truly grave the situation is."

He went back to the report and rifled through the pages with his thumb.

"This contains an official United States Special Census Report, made at the request of a hush-hush senatorial committee about eight months ago. Since then, of course, the subject of sterility has become more or less a public debate. But believe me, if this report were ever published, we'd have a national panic on our hands."

Redbush looked up as the office door opened.

"Oh." The man in the doorway looked at the assembled researchers. "Pardon me," he said. "Thought you were alone, Mr. Redbush."

"Come in, come in, Mr. Carter," said Redbush cheerfully.

The man the office referred to as Little Carter beamed back at the supervisor and came into the room. If anything, he was bouncier and more aggressive than his brother, despite the fact that Big Carter had him spotted by some five inches.

"Project X?" said Little Carter as he took a seat.

"Yes, sir," said Redbush. "Just telling the boys about it."

"Carry on," said Carter, with a wave of his hand.

Redbush threw back his shoulders and said: "The United Chemical Company is destined to play a great role in this new world crisis."

Little Carter, sitting with his eyes closed and the tips of his fingers pressed together, smiled approvingly.

"The United Chemical Company has an opportunity to solve what may well be the greatest problem ever faced by humanity. And we can do it right here, in our own laboratory."

Little Carter nodded.

"We won't be the only people working on this important project. There will be thousands of research departments assigned to the task. Including, I might add, all of our major competitors. So you see, we have a double responsibility in this situation—to see that mankind solves this terrible problem, and to see that Chemco is the company that deserves the thanks."

"Excellent, excellent!" said Little Carter.

The supervisor glowed. "Now, you may ask—*what project?*" Redbush looked directly at Miss Culver, for some reason. "The answer is *babies*." If he was expecting Miss Culver to blush, he was mistaken. "You are already aware that there has been a

marked decline in the nation's birth rate, a decline which first came to the attention of the country's medical authorities back in September. Before long, however, it will become apparent to the entire world that our generation is probably one hundred percent sterile."

The room buzzed. Redbush held up his hand for silence.

"The condition appears to be more than temporary. So, needless to say, there is much cause for alarm. And, needless to say, there is only one direction in which hope lies. Research, gentlemen. Research, research, research!"

"Excellent!" said Little Carter.

"We are going to set up a task force within the company, devoted exclusively to the job of researching this sterility problem. There'll be many long briefing sessions, both here and in Washington, so this group must be prepared to spend long hours in work and travel. A lot of spadework has already been made on the subject, and some of our own experiments gear in quite nicely with it. Mr. Millsong—"

Arthur looked up.

"You'll recall, perhaps, the work you did last year in con-

nection with the Mittinger Virus study?"

Arthur blushed. "Yes, sir."

"Seems to be some thinking along those lines in the initial report. Oh, very roughly, of course. But you might dig up that paper of yours and send it around to me."

"I believe you *have* the paper, Mr. Redbush. Remember? You said you thought it was a lot of poppyc—"

"Never mind," said Redbush testily. "We'll talk about it later. Right now, I want everybody to stand by in the laboratory for our decision about the task force group. When we make our selection, those people named should report immediately to the conference room. Understand?"

"Yes, sir!" said the researchers in chorus.

"Very well. That will be all for now, then. But remember!" He stopped them from leaving. "Not a word of this outside the office. This is top secret information!"

"Yes, sir!" they replied.

"Excellent!" said Little Carter.

Back in the laboratory, Arthur tried to concentrate on his work, but found it impossible. He was too anxious to know if he would be assigned

to the project, and he was far from sure that it would be desirable. He loved his job, all right, and the problem would be particularly exciting to him if he could revive his virus experimentations. But the idea of long hours and travel—going places and meeting new people — he wasn't sure he liked that. And besides, there were the Over 34 Club meetings. He hated to miss them, any of them...

Miss Dana's voice came over the loudspeaker.

"Task force group assigned to Project X now posted on bulletin board."

They crowded around it. On the bottom of the list of eight names was his own: **MILLSONG, ARTHUR.**

Arthur hurried down the steps of the IRT subway. Nine-thirty already! The first briefing session had been a long one, and all through the lecture Arthur had squirmed, thinking of the Club meeting that began at eight that evening.

It would take him a good three-quarters of an hour to get there. That would make it ten-fifteen, or even later. He hoped that Margaret would still be—OOPS!

"What's the big idea, buster?"

"Sorry, sir. I didn't see you."

"Didn't see me?" The man that Arthur had collided with looked incredulous. He was bigger than Big Carter, and much beefier. "You oughta wear glasses!" he pronounced.

Arthur tried to move on down the stairs, but the big man stopped him by a grip on his shoulder. "It's you little guys cause all the trouble," he frothed. "I oughta lean on *you* a little—"

"Please!" said Arthur. "I said I'm sorry—"

The big man snorted and pushed the other away. "Okay, okay! On your way, buster!"

Arthur hurried away, still shaken by the encounter. His train was just pulling in, and gratefully, he entered and took a seat in a secluded corner.

But when he arrived at the headquarters of the Over 34 Club, his confidence was somewhat restored. The lights were still burning brightly in the brownstone windows, and he could hear the quiet, happy sounds of the club members at their evening activity.

He could picture the familiar scene in his mind. The red-and-blue bunting hung along the walls; the card tables set to one side, with old

Mr. Dougherty presiding as usual at the whist game. There would be a record on the battered phonograph, probably Wayne King or Guy Lombardo, and a few couples would be performing an orderly two-step over the polished floor. There would be the usual punchbowl (non-alcoholic, of course) and a set of heavy cut-glass tumblers. Margaret would be there, with her soft voice and gentle Madonna smile, talking to the Club members about books and plays, Beethoven, Strindberg, and John Dewey (her idol, for Margaret was a grade-school teacher).

The whole vulgar world would be shut out behind the Clubroom door, and Arthur's real world, the world of thoughtfulness and kind words would surround him, warm his heart, suffuse him with the idyllic happiness he craved so much.

He knocked on the door and walked in. Jackson, a studious bookkeeper, greeted him with a handclasp. Miss Fewsmit, a librarian, smiled her welcome, and then Arthur was encircled by the Club members, poking gentle fun at his lateness, inviting him to the raspberry punch, urging him to join in the card games or

the chess tournament or the dancing.

Then Margaret appeared, and the moment was complete in its perfection. Almost wordlessly, they began to dance.

"Did you have a good day, Arthur?" she asked. Arthur, holding her in his arms and moving in easy rhythm across the floor, forgot that his day had been disturbing and often depressing, and replied:

"I had a wonderful day!"

The summer passed. The maternity wards emptied, and the staffs assigned to other duties. Obstetricians left their offices early, studying eagerly the discouraging reports from their associations. Macy's in New York, Filene's in Boston, and many other stores abandoned their infants department. Ivory soap began to feature teen-agers in their advertising. Weddings became fewer, and divorces more frequent.

And the research went on.

At the United Chemical Company, this top-secret memorandum went from the office of Supervisor Frank Redbush to the executive offices of Big and Little Carter:

TO: Messrs. Carter

RE: Filtrable Virus Study
In connection with our re-

cent discussion, I am here-with attaching a paper I have prepared for your perusal on the corollary between the gene structure and the virus structure. A great deal of work has been done previously, but I believe the new findings outlined in my paper will produce some interesting speculation on the cause and possible cure of the condition we are researching in Project X. As you know, some of our people are already operating along these lines, and some rather intriguing experiments have been conducted by Mr. Millsong. However, I believe Mr. Millsong's premises are somewhat immature and radical, and I suggest that he be transferred to another division of the task force. I will be happy to personally take over his work, if the contents of this paper convince you that there is merit in my approach.

Little Carter read the attached sheets and scribbled "Excellent!" on his copy of the memo. Big Carter read it and scrawled a virile "O.K!"

Arthur looked dumbfounded when Redbush told him the news.

"But Mr. Redbush!" he argued. "I thought the work

was coming along well. I mean, we haven't shown any positive results yet, but I hope to induce the sterile condition in the guinea pigs sometime this month—"

"Now, Arthur," said Redbush placatingly. "We have to leave personal considerations out of this. You've done valuable work. Very valuable. Now we need you in another phase of our study."

"But I'm really *on* to something, I think." Arthur's voice cracked with disappointment. "You know that crystallized virus I produced last week? Well, we put it through the centrifuge, and—"

"Arthur!" It was a time for sternness. Redbush's brows met in a solid threatening line. "I believe this is in the best interest of the company," he said. "Your experience will be very valuable in our radiation studies."

"I don't *know* anything about radiation!" the little man protested. "In fact, I don't go along at all with the radiation theory. As I said in my paper, Mr. Redbush. I believe it's the result of this new infection, this new virus condition. I mean, there's so much medical evidence—"

"I know all about the evidence!" snapped the supervisor. "But I also know what's

good for Chemco and what isn't. Do you think *you* know better, Mr. Millsong?"

"No, sir, but—"

"But what? If you're such a great organizer, Millsong, why aren't *you* the supervisor, eh? You've been here fifteen years, haven't you?"

"Sixteen," said Arthur miserably.

"Then let's not have any more argument. See Mr. Brubaker this afternoon and he'll update you on his group's progress."

Redbush turned on his heel and left.

Arthur stood there dumbly, looking crushed. Miss Culver noticed his stupefaction, and always fond of a good joke, she approached him gingerly from the rear and said:

"*Boo!*"

Arthur jumped. His flailing hand struck an Erlenmeyer flask, and the yellowish contents sprayed over his sterile white coat, spotting it with bright splotches.

Miss Culver laughed appreciatively, but Arthur took no offense. He suddenly remembered something he forgot to ask Redbush. He raced after the supervisor and halted him at the door.

"Mr. Redbush!" he panted. "One more thing—"

"Yes?" said the other coldly, looking critically at the soiled smock.

"My paper. The one on filtrable viruses. Did you read it?"

Redbush looked thoughtful. "I think so," he said musingly. "But I'm not really sure. I'll try to get around to it, Millsong. Meanwhile, you see Mr. Brubaker. All right?"

"Yes, sir," said Arthur dully.

Winter came. Nursery furniture sold at the price of firewood. Infant photographers turned to cheesecake. Baby food manufacturers concentrated on a "geriatric" line. Pravda hinted that America was somehow responsible for the world's sterility. The UN urged the formation of a world committee on the problem.

And the research continued.

At the Over 34 Club, Arthur Millsong poured the contents of his aching heart out into Margaret's sympathetic ear.

"I just don't believe it's a radiation effect," he told her. "I know that's the immediate popular reaction. But this virus thing—this infection that everybody got last year—"

"But, Arthur," she said

quietly, "it's nothing more than a little cold. I had it last Fall, and it was gone in a week. Penicillin . . ."

"I know," Arthur replied. "But I believe there's a relationship. If I could have only continued my experiments, I might have found the answer." Arthur looked pensive. "Well, maybe I'll find the answer anyway . . ."

"How do you mean, Arthur?"

"Oh, I've been fooling around at home. You know that little lab set-up I have in the garage."

"Wouldn't that be wonderful?" said Margaret. "I mean, if you discovered the solution all by yourself?" She was thrilled.

"Well," said the researcher, "I guess so. But it would still be the property of Chemco. Not that I mind that—"

"Of course not," said Margaret primly. She gazed off into the distance, not even seeing the quiet couples dancing before them. "The Millsong Vaccine," she said dreamily, and with conviction.

"Gosh," said Arthur.

"I'd be so proud of you," she said, looking up at him with melting eyes. "We might even . . ."

Arthur cleared his throat. "I don't suppose you'd care to

see my laboratory?" he asked. "It's pretty messy and all—"

She clapped her hands together. "Oh, Arthur, I'd love it! I don't know much about organic chemistry, but I'm sure it would be fascinating!"

"Really?" Arthur's face shone. "Well, we could do it whenever you say. Tonight, even."

"Let's!" said Margaret. "I'm sure the others won't miss us for a while. And tomorrow's Saturday, so I don't have to worry about school."

They quickly agreed, and in the next hour, they walked into the rather unsterile headquarters of Arthur Mill-song's home laboratory.

"Now this," said Arthur, "is a Chamberland filter. And this," he said, holding up a murky test tube, "is a crystallized virus, the tobacco mosaic virus."

Margaret looked, but without understanding.

"But here's what I'm pinning my hopes on," said Arthur, exhibiting another test tube. "I managed to bring this culture home from the laboratory before Mr. Redbush took over my experiments."

"What is it?"

"I'm not sure." Arthur peered at it. "But I hope—only

hope, mind you—that I've isolated the virus that caused the sterility."

"Oh, Arthur!" Margaret hugged herself with delight.

"I'm not *certain*, you understand. I *am* sure that it's the virus that infected everybody last year. I collected it in connection with some other work I was doing—long before this sterility question came up. But I have no proof yet that it *causes* the sterility. But I'm testing it—"

"How?"

"Well, by vaccine therapy, and some serum. Using guinea pigs. Look."

He guided her over to an embankment of wire cages.

"See that one?" he said. "I call it Redbush." Margaret giggled. "I've infected it with the live virus and made attempts at—" he blushed. "At impregnation," he concluded hastily. "So far, the guinea pig hasn't given birth, but that doesn't prove anything conclusively. I can't really conduct a controlled experiment under these conditions. If I only had the use of the laboratory—"

He went over to another cage. "I call these Little Carter and Big Carter. They were inoculated with the same virus and the—experiment repeated. No births developed.

I thought I would make a chromosome analysis, but I don't have the equipment. However, I made the assumption that they *are* completely sterile, and I've injected one with autogenous vaccine, and the other with serum. Now we'll have to wait and see."

He indicated the rest of the animals with a wave of his hand. "I've done pretty much the same thing with all of the guinea pigs. Some of them have just been *fed* the serum like water, to see what happens. I figured I should try everything."

"They're so cute," said Margaret, walking past the many cages and smiling tenderly at the animals. "Look at this funny one with the crinkly nose. And look at this one—it looks like my Uncle George!" She tittered. "And this one I *really* love. It's so tiny!"

"Which one is that?" asked Arthur, coming over to the cage.

"That wee little one in the corner. Poor little thing," crooned Margaret. "It looks so frightened. Just like a little baby."

Arthur peered into the cage. He straightened up suddenly and reached out for Margaret's hand. He squeezed it, hard.

"Margaret," he said reverently. "Margaret!"

Redbush's heavy brows formed a thundercloud over his eyes as Arthur Millsong spoke. Finally, he shook his head and said:

"Poppycock, Millsong. Pure poppycock."

"But Mr. Redbush—"

"The virus theory has been abandoned by everyone. There just isn't any practical evidence that there's a connection—"

"But if we can isolate that particular virus and see. We'll be able . . ."

Redbush snorted. "There isn't any to isolate. The bug is gone, understand? There hasn't been a case of that particular infection in ten months. Where are we going to find any more?"

"That's what I'm trying to tell you, Mr. Redbush. I became interested in that virus long before the sterility problem arose. I was using it in my Mittinger studies."

"Brubaker tells me that he's making good progress on the radioactive investigation," said Redbush, trying to change the subject. But Arthur was aflame with his argument.

"But Mr. Redbush! You saw my notes. You performed

some of my experiments. You must know—”

The supervisor slammed the desktop. “I got *nothing* from your experiments, Millsong! I tell you the whole virus thing is out the window! Now get back to work and forget it!”

Arthur moistened his lips and made one more try.

“You don’t understand,” he said patiently. “I’ve made some experiments at home, and I’ve gotten some astounding results.”

“Millsong!”

Redbush stood up, his eyebrows a black accent on his frowning face. “Millsong,” he said, “I’ve always felt sorry for you. You’re one of the peculiar breed of people that always gets kicked around in this world. You’d rather be stepped on than fight back. Well, I’m sorry for you, and I’d like to help you all I can. *But I won’t let you get out of line.* Do we understand each other?”

Arthur shook his head unbelievably. “You won’t even listen to me,” he said. “And I’ve got this serum. The only thing that can help.”

“That’s enough now, Arthur.”

“But it works,” the researcher wailed. “It works just by taking it internally. I’ve tested it—”

“*Mill . . . song!*”

“All right, Mr. Redbush.”

Arthur stood up. “All right, sir. I’m sorry I troubled you.”

He went out the door, still shaking his head, looking at the ground. He didn’t even see Big Carter as he came down the hallway, and the collision was inevitable.

“Hey!” cried Big Carter. “What’s the big idea?”

“Sorry, Mr. Carter,” Arthur stumbled. “I seem to be bumping into everybody these days.”

“Well, keep your head up!” Big Carter snapped. “Look alive, boy! You’re dead on your feet!”

“Yes, sir.”

“Show a little of the old moxie, will you, Millsong? You get mousier every day!”

“Yes, sir,” said Arthur.

“All right then.” Big Carter har-rumphed, tugged at his plaid vest, and moved on down the hallway.

When Arthur re-entered the laboratory, he went directly to his table and sat down on a high stool. His eye caught an object in front of a flask. He reached down and picked it up.

It was a cigar. There was a tag attached which read: “TO THE PROUD PAPA. WITH LOVE FROM THE STAFF.”

Arthur looked at it in puzzlement. Was he being ribbed?

Hinton came over to him and said: "Congratulations, old man. Hear you're the papa of a new guinea pig." He laughed.

Miss Culver said: "We didn't know if it was a boy or a girl, but we got you a cigar anyway." She giggled.

By this time, a half dozen of the researchers were crowding around Arthur, grinning foolishly. Brubaker said: "Go on, smoke it, Artie." He held out a match, and Arthur automatically took the light.

It was a mistake, of course. The explosion startled Arthur so that he fell off the stool. The laughter was so general after that, that Little Carter, passing by the lab door, had to poke his head in to see what was happening. When he was told the story, he smiled tightly and said: "Excellent!"

The subway guard pushed Arthur rudely through the doorway. A woman passenger struck him with the tip of her umbrella, and then glared at him as if the blow were his fault. When he took his seat, a heavy-set man in a bulky raincoat shoved him to one side and rattled his newspaper in Arthur's face.

On the street, a truckdriver screamed an epithet at him as he started to cross against the light. A traffic cop shouted at him. The waitress in the little diner where he took an occasional meal was so vexed by his indecision with the menu, that she stomped off and didn't return for twenty minutes. Nothing, absolutely nothing was in his favor.

As he trod the stairs to his apartment, his landlady shrieked at him for not wiping his wet feet on the doormat. He went into his room and turned on the radio, and was berated by an announcer for not taking care of his stomach valves. He left the house as soon as he changed his shirt, and treated himself to a cab ride to the Over 34 Club. He gave the driver the usual fifteen-cent tip, and he accepted it with a contemptuous: "Sure you can spare it, bub?"

Then, the gross world was behind him.

Once more, he was in the sheltered calm of the Clubroom, among the kind, gentle people he loved and understood.

"Is everything all right?" asked Margaret concernedly.

"Fine," said Arthur. "Just fine, now." He nodded pleasantly to old Mr. Dougherty,

who looked up from his cards and grinned. He waved at the librarian, the bookkeeper, the publishing-house reader, the art supply salesman, the ladies from the tea-shop and the dress store.

"My, you're wet," said Margaret, steering him over to the raspberry punch.

"You really should take better care of yourself," she clucked. "I'll bet there are holes in your socks, too."

"There are," Arthur admitted. "I've got a drawer-full of socks that need mending. And there are a lot of other things I need, too." He reached out for her hand.

"Most of all, I need someone. Someone like you . . ."

"Margaret," he said tenderly. "I need a wife."

She blushed. He clasped her hands together. "You know what I'm saying, Margaret. I should have said it to you long ago, but I guess I just didn't have the nerve." He swallowed hard. "I love you," he said feelingly. "I want you to marry me."

"Oh, Arthur!"

She started to throw her arms about him, but then remembered that they weren't alone. Instead, she smiled happily at him, misty-eyed.

"One little addition," he

said gaily, "and then we'll get everybody to drink a toast to our happiness."

"Addition?" Margaret watched him remove a vial of amber fluid from his jacket pocket. "What is it, Arthur? It's not—not *whiskey*?"

"Certainly not!" Arthur answered. He uncorked the vial and carefully poured the contents into the raspberry punch. He began to stir it in thoroughly. "It's something new I've discovered—something that will give our lives a wonderful flavor . . ."

"Are you sure it's all right?" she asked.

"Of course. Nothing was ever *more* right, Margaret."

Arthur turned towards the other members in the room. "Hey, everybody!" he called. "Come over here. We're going to drink a toast to another pair of newlyweds!"

There was a great shout of joy from the Club members as they circled the engaged couple. They clapped Arthur on the back, kissed Margaret (who blushed deeply) and even shed a few tears.

Arthur lifted his glass high, and spoke.

"Fellow club members," he said, "here's a toast! To everybody here and their happiness. A toast to the Meek!"

THE END

MAGIC WINDOW

By ROBERT F. YOUNG

ILLUSTRATOR SUMMERS

*By what strange magic could
an ordinary window reflect
the beauty in the soul of
a lonely girl?*

I DON'T know which was the more improbable—the girl or her painting.

Of all the artists displaying their wares at the sidewalk exhibit, she was the only one with but a single canvas. She stood beside it timidly, as though afraid someone would stop and make fun of it—or, as though afraid no one would stop at all. In a way, she looked like a child, with her odd blue eyes and her sunny hair (one lock of which the April wind had playfully tumbled down upon her forehead); a charming and undernourished child playing grown-up in a blue artist's smock and an absurd beret.

As for her painting—Well, try to imagine a vast meadow rolling away to low, lavender hills. Now scatter a handful of small lakes over the meadow and sprinkle them liberally with starlight. Now raise your eyes. The first thing you'll see is a line of exotic mountains

capped with starlit snow, and then you'll behold a sky so crammed with stars—blue ones, white ones, red ones, yellow ones—that there's no room left for darkness.

Now think of the title—*Meadow Lakes by Starlight*...

"You—you do see them, don't you? The stars, I mean."

I wasn't aware that I'd paused. Art is not my cup of tea, and the only reason I'd been walking through the exhibit was because it stood between the parking lot where I'd left my car, and the office of my next customer. "Why, of course, I see them," I said.

I don't believe I've ever witnessed anyone's eyes become so bright as hers did. "And—and the meadow and the lakes?"

"And the mountains, too... Do you think I'm blind?"

"So many people are. Especially the candlestick makers."

"The candlestick makers! People don't make candlesticks any more."



No one else was interested in the picture.

"But they think like people who do. They see like them. The butchers and the bakers aren't so bad. They can see a little. But the candlestick makers can't see anything at all."

I stared at her. Her eyes were disarming enough, but a bit too earnest for comfort. "Well," I said, "I've got to be getting along."

"Do—do you like my painting?"

There was a desperate quality, both in the way she spoke and in the way she looked at me. But there was another quality present, too—a quality that made dishonesty impossible. "I'm afraid not," I said. "It—it frightens me a little."

Her lashes fluttered once over her blue eyes, like quick clouds over blue patches of sky. Then: "That's all right," she said. "Please don't say you're sorry."

I'd been about to say just that, and now that I couldn't, there was nothing else I could say. I stood there a while longer, wondering what to do, feeling, for some illogical reason, as though a significant moment had come and passed, and that I had lived through it like some dull clod totally unable to grasp its context. Finally, I touched my hat, muttered a little "G'by" and walked away.

It was a long morning and a bad one. My usual glibness had forsaken me, and I got no more than standard orders from the first two customers I called on, nothing from the third. I knew what the trouble was—

That damned painting!

Everywhere I looked, I saw it—the meadow, the lakes, the stars. And my mind had added to the original: there was a girl walking on the meadow now—a girl with thin cheeks and off-key blue eyes; an ethereal girl in an ill-fitting artist's smock, alone beneath that vast, impossible sky . . .

I met Mildred at noon and we lunched together in an out-of-the-way, but very respectable, restaurant. Mildred is the girl I'm going to marry. She's a fine girl and comes from a fine family. Her father is a prominent shoestring manufacturer, and he's told me several times that he'll be glad to place me in his sales department any time I say the word. As the salary he mentions by far exceeds my present income, I'll probably say the word shortly.

I'm sure we'll be very happy. We're going to buy a ranch-style house in the suburbs and raise children and plant arborvitae and juniper and dwarf

pine. Summer evenings we'll have backyard barbecues, or go for a spin in the country, and on winter nights we'll watch TV, or take in the latest movie. Perhaps I'll be accepted into the local order of the Masons, and maybe Mildred will become an Eastern Star . . . I'm *sure* we'll be very happy. A little stodgy, perhaps, by the time middle-age catches up with us, and perhaps a little set in our ways; but happiness isn't something that flies with the night, or visits your backyard once in a blue moon. It's a house and a new car and the sense of being one with your fellow men. It's a pension check and an insurance annuity and a Series E savings bond—

Or so I tell myself.

Over and over again . . .

Mildred was her usual poised self at lunch, said all the proper things. I thought I was my usual self, too, and that I was saying all the proper things, till, just after I'd paid the check, she gave me that all-knowing look from beneath her arched eyebrows, and said: "What's the matter, Hal? You're worried about something."

I considered telling her about the painting, but I knew I'd be wasting my time. Not that Mildred isn't an under-

standing, even a broad-minded, person; but I could hardly expect her to understand something I didn't understand myself. Not only that, mentioning the painting would have involved mentioning the girl, and somehow I couldn't bear the thought of exposing her to Mildred's feminine scrutiny.

So I said: "Didn't you ever hear of blue Mondays? Well, this is one of them."

"Blue isn't the word for it," she said. But she let it go at that.

I had to drive out to Addlebury that afternoon: a steady customer of mine, who operates a small machine shop there, wanted advice on how best to turn down a particularly hard alloy into a newly-designed camshaft which he intends to put into production. I solved his problem for him, using one of our Supercutter tungstens, and received a gratifying order for my trouble. It was almost 6:30 by the time I got back to the city, and I should have headed straight for my hotel for a change and a shower. I was due to pick up Mildred at 7:00.

But I did nothing of the sort. Instead, I detoured around to the street where I'd seen the art exhibit that morning. It

was a completely illogical thing to do. I knew perfectly well that the show must have been over hours ago.

It wasn't over, though. Not quite. One artist still remained. One painting. Her face was blue with cold when I pulled up in the no parking zone, her cheeks thinner than ever. The bright colors of *Meadow Lakes by Starlight* flashed bravely in the last slanted rays of the sun.

I got out of the car and walked over to where she was standing. The brightness came into her eyes again, and this time it was accompanied by hope. "How much is it?" I asked.

"Five dollars."

"It's worth twenty." I pulled the bill out of my billfold and handed it to her. I was so mad that my hands were trembling. "Didn't—didn't anyone else ask to buy it?"

"No. No one even stopped—except you."

"Did you have dinner?"

She shook her head. She was rolling up the painting. Presently she handed it to me. "I'm not very hungry," she said.

"Let's have a bite anyway."

"All right."

I took her to a diner I'd passed several blocks back, and both of us had steak and

French fries and coffee. It was 7:15 by the time we finished eating, and I knew I was hopelessly late for my date with Mildred. Somehow, I didn't care. I pulled out my cigarettes and we lit up over our second coffees. "What's your name?" I asked.

"April."

"April," I repeated. "That's an odd name."

"Not so odd, really. Lots of girls are named 'April'."

"I'm Hal . . . Do you do much painting?"

"Not any more. The market keeps shrinking every year."

"Maybe your work's too far-fetched for the average person," I said. "Take *Meadow Lakes by Starlight*, for instance."

"I don't think that one's far-fetched. It's just the view from my kitchenette window."

"You—you don't live here in the city, then." I should have said "on earth." It would have been more appropriate.

"Yes, I live here sometimes . . . I can see just about anything from my kitchenette window. You could see just about anything from *your* window too—if you looked hard enough . . . I call mine 'The Magic Casement'."

I remembered my high school Keats. "*Magic casements, opening on the foam of*

perilous seas," I quoted, "in faery lands forelorn."

She nodded solemnly. "Yes," she said. The earnestness in her eyes would have been frightening if their cerulean cast hadn't tempered it. "Keats knew. So did Wordsworth. *We have given our hearts away . . .* Do you read much poetry, Hal?" Her question was innocently direct.

"I should say not! About all I have time for these days is the paper every morning, and a magazine every now and then."

"Just so you don't watch TV," she said.

"And what's the matter with TV?"

"It's a medium for candlestick makers."

So there we were, back, practically, to where we'd started from.

"Come on," I said, "I'll take you home."

She lived in a tall, gaunt apartment house on a street lined with similar structures. When she asked me if I'd care to come in for a few minutes, I didn't know what to say. Despite her little-girl appearance, she was a long way from being a little girl; and yet I couldn't, for the life of me, put her into the category where you usually put women who

make such invitations on such short acquaintances.

When I continued to hesitate, she said, "I'll show you 'The Magic Casement'."

"All right," I said. Mildred was undoubtedly mad at me already; a few more minutes' delay wouldn't make my reception any chillier.

April's apartment was on the third floor, No. 303. There were four rooms. Roomettes would be a more appropriate term. A small parlor, a bedroom, and a kitchen and a bathroom. She took my coat and hung it over a chair, and led me into the kitchen. It was a sad kitchen. A cramped little stove, an antediluvian refrigerator, a cast-iron sink, a beat-up table and chairs. The single window was above the sink, and it was the one object in the room that wasn't mean and ugly—probably for no better reason than the fact that it was a double window with small panes, and opened outward like a pair of French doors.

She got two bottles of beer out of the refrigerator, opened them and handed one to me. I was mildly shocked that so young a person should have beer in her refrigerator, and then I reminded myself that she wasn't young at all, that she was as old, probably, as I

was, and possibly even older.

She drank her beer out of the bottle, and I followed suit. I noticed her easel, then, propped against the wall beside the sink, and her palette and brushes lying on the sideboard. I raised my eyes to the window. "The Magic Casement?" I asked.

She nodded, a little shyly. "Yes." She leaned over the sink and unfastened the catch and threw the doors wide. The dampness of the spring night crept into the room.

I looked over her shoulder. Naturally, I didn't expect to see a meadow with starlit lakes—I'm not *that* pedestrian; but I *did* expect to see a view of some kind—a narrow backyard, maybe, or a distant park; anything at all on which a slightly unstable person might base a fantasy such as the painting I had just purchased.

I saw nothing of the sort. Less than ten feet from the open window, the kitchen light formed a yellow rectangle on the brick wall of the next apartment house.

April was regarding me intently. "I see a river," she said. "A blue river. There are golden trees growing on the farther bank, and nestled among the trees is a silver

house with azure shutters. A pebbled path winds down to the river bank, lined with lilies of the valley . . . What do you see?"

"Bricks," I said.

She gave a little sigh. Her blue eyes were so intense they frightened me. "Try," she said.

And I did try. The palms of my hands were moist, and I could feel the prickling of cold sweat on my forehead. I found myself wishing that I *would* see a river, golden trees, a pebbled path . . . hoping desperately that the window *would* prove to be a "Magic Casement" instead of just a convenient means for rationalizing hallucinations.

Again, all I saw were bricks.

I shook my head and turned away. I saw the disappointment come into her eyes just before she dropped them. Somehow, it made me angry.

"Why should you expect me to see something when there's nothing there to see?" I said. "I can't help it if I'm normal!"

"But I can help you to see, Hal. I *know* I can!" She stepped close to me and gripped my lapels with taut fingers. Her eyes, upturned now, were enormous, and the blue in them had darkened to the color of an April sky before a sudden storm. "Don't let them

swallow you up, Hal. Don't let them turn you into a carbon copy of everybody else. There is magic in the world, no matter what their facts and figures say—and I can help you to see it. But you've got to believe in me!"

I gripped her wrists till her fingers loosened their grip on my lapels. Then I went into the parlor and picked up my coat. "I've got to be going," I said.

She had followed me in from the kitchen. The storm in her eyes had blown over, taking their blueness with it. She did not look like a child any more: she looked like a tired old woman. "I'm never coming back again," she said, half to herself. "Never . . ." Then, "Thank you for buying my dinner—for buying my painting. Will you promise to hang it over your mantel after you are married and not let your children throw darts at it?"

"I promise," I lied.

She opened the door for me. "Good-by," Hal.

"Good-by," I said.

I saw her only once after that. It was the last day of the month, and Mildred and I had driven uptown to attend the midnight show. I had just got out of the car and was walking around to the curb, when I glanced up and saw her coming down the street.

She was so thin she seemed tenuous, unreal. There were shadows beneath her eyes, hollows in her cheeks. She was wearing a faded jacket and an indifferent skirt. Her bare legs were pale flickerings in the darkness . . .

I was struck—shocked, in fact—by her aloneness. There were scores of people all around her, the street was filled with cars—

But she was completely alone. Utterly alone.

She looked right at me when she passed, then quickly looked away. I wanted to call out to her, to run after her and stop her. But her name froze in my throat and my feet turned into lumps of clay. A moment later she was gone, engulfed by the crowd and the darkness.

I forced myself to walk the rest of the way around the car. I forced myself to open the door. I gave Mildred my arm when she stepped out. My arm was all I could give her. My mind was somewhere on a vast meadow where a lonely girl walked among starlit lakes. . . .

It was late the next afternoon before I got a chance to stop by the gaunt apartment house. When my knock on No. 303 went unanswered, I thought at first that I'd blun-

dered into the wrong building; but the landlord apprised me otherwise when I went back down the three flights of stairs and interrupted his evening meal. I had the right apartment house, he told me, but the girl I was looking for had checked out the night before.

"What time did she check out?" I asked.

He wiped his chin on the paper napkin he'd carried to the door. "About 11:30."

"I see." There was a large calendar hanging on the opposite wall and I automatically glanced at the date. May 1.

May 1 . . .

It was one of those crazy thoughts that you have sometimes—so crazy that you try to discredit it immediately so that the world can return to its natural balance—

"Could—could you tell me what day she checked in?"

"I'll have to look in my book."

He went over to an old-fashioned desk, fumbled with the catch, finally shoved back the retractile top. He pulled the book—a tattered ledger with a soiled cover—from the top drawer, began thumbing carefully through it. Supper sounds came from the kitchen and the whole apartment smelt of onions and fried po-

tatoes and something else I couldn't identify. A TV speaker blared uninterruptedly from an adjacent room. I realized that I was sweating—

"Here it is—"

"She checked in March thirty-first . . . Why, I remember now. She got us out of bed. It was nearly midnight and it was raining and she was wearing a blue raincoat with flowers painted on the collar. I didn't want to take her in at first because she didn't have any luggage. You know how it is sometimes. But there was something about her . . . Say, is something the matter?"

"No," I said. "No . . . Nothing's the matter. Thanks—thanks for your trouble . . ."

—and if you can't discredit it, you do the only other thing you can do. You rationalize it.

I rationalized it all the way back to my room. I did a pretty good job, too, and the world was just about back to where it belonged when I opened my door. Then I thought of the painting, and I did something I'd lacked the courage to do the night before—I took it out of the closet where I'd hidden it, carried it over to the window and unrolled it.

It was like the coach turning into a pumpkin and the footmen becoming white mice.

(Continued on page 84)

POT-LUCK GENII

By ELLIS HART

*Is there much a sardine can do after it's packed in a can?
Of course not. Well, the same thing goes for a genii.*

“NOW who ever heard of Turkish Period?” Danny Squires objected, loudly.

“Danny! People are staring at us, lower your voice!” Connie Squires reprimanded him. They stood on the street, before a furniture store, and Danny was determined not to enter.

“Come on, Connie,” Danny urged her, “let’s get away from these junk shops and go see some inexpensive modern stuff. You know perfectly well I don’t make enough to start filling the apartment with expensive antiques.”

Connie looked furtively up and down the street—for she was more concerned with a “scene” than with the argument itself—and then moved in toward Danny with a determined air. “Now you listen to me, Mr. Danny Squires. Did you or did you not marry me four days ago, and promise to love, honor and obey and all that other business?”

Danny’s baby-blue eyes rolled to Heaven and he knew he was losing ground. With instinctive husbandly defense

he answered, “Well, sure, Connie, but—”

“Well, then,” Connie Squires proceeded, “I am your wife, and you have not taken me on a honeymoon—”

“I can’t afford one!” Danny interrupted.

“—have not taken me on a honeymoon,” Connie repeated with a certain inflexibility permeating her words, “consequently, we will buy a little furniture for that rabbit warren you so laughingly call our new little home. And little is right. But new is hardly the term; that place was new when Barbara Fritchie hung out her flag.

“So to make my life bearable, for the next few weeks, till we can talk Mr. Upjohn into giving you a raise—”

“Mr. Upjohn!” Danny fairly screamed. “You’ve got to stay away from the boss, honey. Honest, he won’t give me a raise, and I’d rather you stayed away from hi—”

“Until then,” she went on relentlessly, “we will decorate our apartment in the style I’ve wanted for years.”

"Turkish Period?" Danny asked pathetically.

"Turkish Period," Connie seconded the choice.

Danny flipped his hands in the air. What was the use. He had known Connie was strong-willed when he had married her, and actually that was one of the many things that had attracted him to her slight, blonde beauty. But he was strong-willed too, and he was sure in the long haul, he would outlast her. Then he stopped thinking those things, for they had been married only four days, and it did not seem proper for a husband to be contemplating the "edge" each sex tries to hold over the other in the never-ceasing, unconscious battle of the genders.

"Okay," he said finally, "I suppose Turkish Period it'll be. What the hell *is* Turkish Period?"

She took his arm lovingly, and turned him around to look in the furniture store window. "Well, honey, it's not *actually* Turkish. It's more Mesopotamian. You know, all teakwood furniture and silks and . . ."

"Sounds hideous," Danny commented.

"So you're starting up again!" she dropped his arm,

her eyes flashing, her mouth a tight little line.

"Now Connie—" he tried to placate her.

"Don't now Connie me, Daniel Frank Squires! I'm really ashamed of you, depriving me of the few little pleasures I need to make my life a boo-hoo, blub, boo-sniff, hoo-hoo . . ."

The edge was hers; she had melted into tears.

"Connie . . . Connie . . ." he tried to soothe her. She knocked away his comforting hand, saying, "You beast." That was too much for Danny. The words were so obviously put-on, he was suddenly confronted with the fact that his new bride was using her wiles to get him to an untenable position where he *must* accede to Turkish (Mesopotamian) Period. This somehow infuriated him, so guileless had he been, and he drew himself up in a fury.

"Now dammit!" he began.

Her tears doubled in flow. Danny stood there helplessly, hoping desperately that no cop would come along and say, "This guy botherin' ya, lady?"

"Connie, okay, okay, we'll have Turkish Period. Come on, come on. It doesn't matter what it costs, I can scrape up the money somehow."

"I only wanted a booooo nice



When Mohandus Mukhar said out—he meant out!

home to make youuu-hooo happy, and you're (sniff!) calling me all sorts of namesssssss-ooo—"

Finally, he quieted her down. When he had agreed to the furniture. They turned again, and walked into the furniture store. It was not one of the brick and glass onyx emporiums where sensible furniture might be found, if one searched hard enough and paid high enough and retained one's senses when they were trying to palm off modernistic night-mares in which no comfortable position might be found; no, it was not even one of those. This was an antique shop.

They looked at beds that had canopies and involved piping on the bedposts. They looked at rugs that were built up with pillows, so visitors could sit on the floors. They looked at tables built six inches off the floor, for low banquets. They inspected water pipes and hookahs and jugs and vases until Danny thought surely he would go mad.

Yet oddly enough, Connie chose very few items, and those she *did* select, were moderately-priced and quite handsome . . . for what they were. And as the hours passed, and

as they moved around town from one junk room to another, Danny's respect for his wife grew and grew, for she was selecting an apartment full of furniture that wasn't bad at all, not at all.

They were finished at six o'clock, and had bills of sale that totaled no more than two hundred dollars. Exactly thirty dollars less than Danny had decided was enough to start their housekeeping. He had taken the money from his very thin savings account, and had known he must eventually start buying on time, or they would not be able to get enough furniture to start living properly.

But despite her method of getting what motif she wanted, Connie had acquired three rooms of furniture, at something less than what Danny had decided must be only the initial outlay of cash.

He was doubly certain he had picked the right girl.

They were tired, and filled with that subliminal warmth that comes only with knowing things are right with the world. And as they walked down the street, in a shabby section of town which neither had ever been in before, and neither knew quite how they had gotten here, they saw the empty lot. It was sandwiched

in between two tenements—clothes hanging flappingly from lines between them—and was weed-patched and garbage-strewn. It did not attract their attention in even the slightest, and they started to pass it.

"Let's get a cab and go back to the apartment," Danny said. He tightened his arm about her waist, and she smiled up at him coquettishly.

"Lecher," she said.

"Lech, hell," he replied snappishly. "I paid my three bucks for the license. It's legal; says so in the fine print." She playfully tried to jab him with her elbow, her pretty face turning pink.

They turned around to look for a cab, and the empty lot was gone.

In its place, sandwiched between the two tenements was a little shop. It was a one-storey affair, with a dingy front, and its front window completely grayed-over with dust. A hand-painted line of elaborate script on the glass-panel of the door (also un-see-throughable because of dust) proclaimed: *Mohandus Mukhar, Curios.*

Even as their jaws sagged . . . even as they boggled at the strange thing that had happened . . . even as they wondered at their own sanity

. . . a little man in a flowing robe and a fez shot out of the front door, skidded to a stop, whirled and slapped a huge sign on the outside of the window. He swiped at it four times with a big paste-brush, sticking it to the glass, and whirled back inside, slamming the door.

Danny looked at Connie; she looked back at him.

"We're both crazy, you know," he said.

"Must be if you see the same thing I see." Her reply was as sincere as his had been.

"Empty lot?" he asked.

"Clothes lines, weeds, garbage, empty," she agreed.

"Little store," he pointed out.

"Man in fez, Mukhar is the name," she added.

Without hardly realizing it, they were walking toward the shop. They read the sign. *Big Sale! Hurry! Now! Quick!*

Danny shrugged and opened the door for Connie. As the door opened inward, a tiny bell went tinkle-tinkle, and they stepped across the threshold into the shop.

It was cool and musty in the shop, and strange fragrances chased each other here and there. The very dimness of the shop began to pass in a few moments, however, and they

looked around them. The shop was loaded with junk. From floor to ceiling, from wall to wall, on tables and in heaps, the place was filled with oddities and bric-a-brac. Piles of things tumbled over each other on the floor; heaps of things leaned against the walls. There was barely room to walk down the aisle between the stacks and mounds of things. Things in all shapes, things in all sizes and colors. Things. That was all they could think of when they tried to separate the jumble of the place in their minds. Stuff and flotsam and bits and junk. All over the place.

"Curios, folks," a voice said, by way of explanation.

Connie leaped in the air, and came down on Danny's foot. "Yowch!" he exclaimed, and then looked around for the speaker. He was standing beside such a pile of tumbled miscellania, that for a minute they had not been able to separate him from the very merchandise he sold.

"We saw your sign," Connie said.

But Danny was more blunt, more direct. "There was an empty lot here, then a minute later this shop. How come?"

The little man stepped out from the nick-nacks, and his little nut-brown, wrinkled

face burst into a million-creased smile. "A fortuitous accident, my children. A slight worn spot in the fabric of the cosmos, and I have been set down here for—how long I do not know. But it never hurts to try and stimulate business while I'm here."

"Uh, yeah," Danny said. He looked at Connie. Her expression was as blank as his own.

The words of the little man had meant nothing; not one phrase out of his mouth had made sense. Cosmos, fabric, worn spot? What the blazes was he talking about? They had no idea, but whatever it was, this was as strange an occurrence as they had ever beheld. One minute an empty lot—the next a curio shop. And there was no way of building a complete store full of junk in the matter of a few—

"Oh!" Connie cried, and went madly dashing off into one of the side-corridors lined with curios. "This is perfect! Just what we needed for the end table. Oh, Danny, it's a dream! It's absolutely the *ne plus ultra*!"

Danny walked over to her, but in the dimness of the side-corridor between the curios, he could barely make out what it was she was holding. He

drew her into the semi-light near the door. It had to be:

Aladdin's lamp, naturally.

Well, perhaps not that particular person's lamp, but one of the old, vile-smelling oil-burning jobs, with long thin spout, round-bottom body and wide, flaring handle.

It was green with tarnish, and dusty with rust, and completely covered by the soot and debris of centuries. There was no contesting its antiquity; nothing so cruddy could fail to be authentic. But, "What the deuce do you want with that old thing, Connie?" Danny asked.

"But Danny, it's so *per-fect*. If we just shine it up a bit; as soon as we put a little work into this lamp, it will be a beauty." Danny knew he was defeated . . . and she'd probably be right, too. It would probably be very handsome when shined and brassed-up.

"How much," he asked the old man in the fcz. He did not want to seem anxious; these old camel traders were sharpies at bargaining, when they knew you wanted something.

"Fifty dollars, ch?" the old man asked. His tone was one of malicious humor. He knew damned well he wasn't going to get his price, but as a start-

er that would bring up the eventual price.

Danny boggled. "Put it down, Connie, and let's get out of here."

He started toward the door, dragging his wife behind him, but she still held the lamp, and the little Arabian's voice halted them. "All right, sir. You are a sharp man, I can see that. You know a bargain when you spy it. But I am unfamiliar in this time-frame with your dollars and your Americanese, having been set down here only once before, and since I am more at ease with the drachma than the dollar, I will cut my own throat, slash my very wrists as it were, and offer you this magnificent antiquity for . . . uh . . . thirty-five dollars?" His voice was querulous, his tone one of wonder and hope and anticipation.

"Jesse James had a horse!" Danny snorted, and kept moving toward the door.

"Thirty," the little old man said.

"Five!" Danny snorted, "and overpriced at that."

"My life's blood you're sucking," the little man said, but his eyes were aglant with the topaz shine of the trader. "Twenty-seven fifty."

"Seven dollars and that's tops!" Danny yelled over his

shoulder. Connie watched him with awe and admiration.

"My death is about to become a reality," the Arabian bellowed, tearing at the strands of white hair showing under the fez. "You rob me. Twenty. A seven-fifty drop!"

"Okay, okay," Danny turned around full and dragged out his wallet. He extricated one of the three ten dollar bills still inside, and turning to Connie, said, "You sure you want this piece of crap?" She nodded, and he held the bill out to the little man. For the first time Danny realized the little man had pointed slippers on, and hair growing from his ears.

"Ten bucks and that's it. Take it or leee—"

The little man moved with the agility of a ferret, and whisked the tanner from Danny's outstretched hand before the other could draw it back. "Sold!" the little man chuckled.

He spun around once, and when he faced them again, the ten dollars was out of sight. "And a steal, a veritable steal, sir!"

Danny abruptly realized he had been taken. The thing had probably been picked up in a junkyard and was worth but nothing at all. "Now look, I

don't think—" he started to say, but the piles of junk had begun to waver and shimmer and bloom with light.

The little man's wrinkled face drew up in alarm. "Out! Get out, quick! The time-frame is sucking back together! Out! Get out now if you don't want to roam the eternities with me and this shop . . . and I can't afford any help! Out!"

He shoved them forward, and Connie slipped and fell, flailing into a pile of glass-ware. But oddly, none of it broke. Her hand went out to protect herself and went right through the glass. Danny dragged her to her feet, panic coursing through their veins, as the shop continued to waver and grow more indistinct about them.

"Out! Out! Out!" the little Arabian kept yelling.

Then they were at the door, and he was kicking them—literally planting his curl-slipped foot in Danny's back-side and shoving—from the store. They landed in a heap on the sidewalk. The lamp bounced from Connie's hand and went into the gutter with a clang and clatter. The little man stood there grinning in the doorway, and as the shop faded and disappeared, they heard him mumble happily,

"A clear nine-seventy-five profit. What a lemon!"

Then the shop was gone, the curios were gone, the little man was gone, and they got to their feet before an empty, weed-overgrown lot.

In the face of all that, the lamp hardly seemed worth ten dollars. Lemon?

Back at the apartment, things seemed more final. Okay, so they had blown a ten-spot on a piece of metal junk that was maybe worth thirty-five cents at an auction, so what? In the pale light from the overhead bulb, shining down on their empty apartment—the furniture they had bought had not yet been delivered—they seemed more depressed. A few packing-cases full of dishes and linens, wedding gifts they had not yet put away, sat against the walls. And the scene was so bare and depressing, Connie sank onto one of these cases with a leaden sigh.

"Oh, Danny," she breathed, her eyes closed. "Will we ever be able to afford a real house, and a honeymoon—oh, honey, how I want a honeymoon."

Her face was very sad. Danny sat down on the floor beside her, laid his head on her lap and put his arms around her knees. His voice was low

and honest as he said, "I know baby. Maybe you should have married somebody else who had more dough. Working as an accountant for B. G. Upjohn and Sons isn't the most promising career in the city.

"And it doesn't look to get any better very soon. Mr. Upjohn pays a fair wage, but over that he's pretty tight."

Connie leaned over and kissed the top of his head.

"Don't talk that way, Danny. You were the guy all the time. Like they say, it had to be you." He reached up and kissed her. She was holding the lamp in her lap, and the pressure of her leaning against it to kiss Danny, stuck the nozzle into her side.

"Ouch!" she said, and sat up quickly.

"What?" Danny asked.

"Oh, I stuck myself with the lamp. Hey!" her face grew bright with happiness forced into it by necessity, "let's shine the thing. Who knows, maybe we got ourselves a 24-carat genii."

Danny rose to his feet and drew a rag from among many they used to dust the apartment. He shook it out over the box that had held it, and gave it to Connie. "Go, oh mistress of my Mesopotamian Mansion, shine the damn thing."

"Watch your language," she reprimanded him, accepting the rag. "Can you figure that out about the store and that Mr. Mukhar?"

Danny lit a cigarette and shook his head. "Beats me."

"So strange," Connie said, briskly rubbing the lamp with the rag. Under her flying fingers the rust and tarnish began to wear away. In a short time the layers covering the metal were worn away, and suddenly she was rubbing the bright skin of the lamp itself.

"Oh look how nice it is, underneath all that, Danny," she glori ed. He came over to see how it looked, and at that precise instant, the lamp jumped from her hand, emitted a sharp, grey puff of smoke, and a monstrous voice bellowed out in the apartment:

Ah-Ha! It screamed, louder than a subway train, *Ah-Ha!*

Free at last! Free—as free as I'll ever be—after ten thousand years! Free to speak and act (but stuck in this accursed tin can) my will to be known! Ah-Ha!

Danny was first to recover. Connie sat in the corner, her face white, her eyes huge, her hand to her mouth, disbelief pouring unquenchably from

her like sweat. Danny stood up and looked down at the innocuous lamp.

"Are you really in there?"

Certainly, clod human.

"Are, are you a genii?"

That is what they call me, buffoon human!

"And you can grant wishes?"

Naturally, but not to you, disgusting grub of mankind.

"Hey, listen," Danny was mad himself now, "I don't give a damn what or who you are! You can't talk to me that way." Then a thought dawned on Danny. "After all, I'm your master!"

Ah! Correction, filth of humanity. There are some jinn who are mastered by their owners, but I am not one of them, for I am not free to leave this metal prison. I was put in here many ages ago by a drunken sorcerer, who knew nothing of molecular compression and the binding forces of the universe. He put me into a lamp far too small for me, and I have been wedged within ever since. Over the ages my good nature has rotted away. Now I am powerful, but trapped. Those who own me cannot request anything and hope to get just what they want. So you'll have to take pot-luck, whatever I feel like throwing your way. I am un-

happy, and an unhappy jinn is an evil jinn. Were I able to get out, I might be your slave, but as I am now, I will visit unhappiness on you in a thousand forms!

Danny chuckled. "The hell you will. I'll toss you in the incinerator."

Ah! But you cannot, the Genii interrupted. That is a part of the bargain you know nothing about. Once you have bought the lamp, you cannot get rid of it unless someone—of his own volition, without priming by you or your group—buys it from you. You cannot lose it, destroy it or give it away. I am with you forever now, for who would buy such a miserable lamp? That clod sorcerer, couldn't even give me a decent vessel to be imprisoned in! Ooooh, how I hate people!

And thunder rolled in the sky.

"Wh-what are you going to do?" Connie asked.

Do? Just ask me for something, and you shall see!

"I will not!" Danny snapped back.

Wouldn't you like a billfold full of money? the Genii asked sincerity in his huge, hollow, from-the-lamp voice.

"Well, sure, I want money, but—"

The Genii's laughter was

gigantic, and suddenly cut off by the rain of frogs that fell from a point one inch below the ceiling, clobbering Danny and Connie with small, reeking, wriggling green bodies. Connie screamed and dove for the clothes closet. She came out a second later, her hair full of them; they were falling in there, too. The rain of frogs continued, and when Danny opened the front door to try and escape them, they fell in the hall. He slammed the door—why should anyone else suffer with them?—and covered his head with his hands. The frogs fell writhing and smelling and then they were knee-deep in them, with little filthy, warty bodies jumping up at their faces.

What a lousy disposition I've got! the Genii laughed. *But you can call me Akhbar Ali. It used to mean rotter, where I come from!* And he laughed again, a huge peal that was silenced only when the frogs stopped and other forms of misery took their place.

It went on for a week.

They could not get away from it, no matter where they went. They were also slowly starving, for they could not go out to buy groceries without the Earth opening under

their feet, or a herd of elephants chasing them down the street, or hundreds of people getting violently ill around them. So they stayed in and ate what canned goods they had stored up in the first four days of their marriage. But who could eat with locusts filling the apartment from top to bottom, or snakes that were intent on gobbling them up like little white rats.

First came the frogs, then the whirling dust storm, then the spiders and gnats, then the snakes and then the locusts and then the tiger that had them backed against a wall and ate the chair they used to ward him off. Then came the bats and the hailstones and then the floor dissolved under them and they clung to the wall fixtures while their furniture—which had been quickly delivered, for the moving men had brought it during the hailstones—fell through, nearly killing the little old lady who lived beneath them.

Then the walls turned red hot and melted, and then the plaster fell down on them, and finally Connie had had enough. She cracked, and went gibbering around the room, tripping over the man-eating vines that were growing out of the light sockets and the floorboards.

She finally collapsed and cried till her face grew puffy and her eyes flame-red.

"Oh, how can I get away from all this?" she screamed hysterically.

You can divorce him, and that means you are voided out of the purchase contract, for he bought it, not you, the Genii suggested.

Connie looked up with hate in her eyes and yelled, "I won't! I won't! You can't make me. We've only been married a week and four days and I won't leave him!"

She ran to Danny and hugged him, though he had turned to tapioca pudding and was melting. But three days later, when ghost images of people she had feared all her life, came to haunt her, she broke completely, threw down her wedding ring, and allowed Danny to call the rest home on the boa constrictor that had once been the phone. "You can come and get me when all this is over," she cried pitifully. Then when the downstairs buzzer rang, for the men from the home had come, she left sobbing uncontrollably.

She was still crying as she got into the white ambulance, and the unearthly genii's laughter rolled around the

sky like thunder when they drove off.

Danny was left alone.

With a genii who had been pushed into a lamp too small for him, from which he could not escape, and which had turned him into a raving, revengeful maniac.

Danny slumped down in the pool of molten slag, and tried to think, while the ants swarmed around him.

It was less than three days after she had been admitted to *Hideaway Rest Home* that Danny came to get Connie. He came into her room, where the shades were drawn, and the sheets were very white, and when she saw him, her teeth began to chatter. Fear was written across her face in livid lines of terror.

"D-Danny, is it, does he still, are we, no! I won't come back. I can't, Danny! I can't stand it!"

He came to the side of her bed, and thumbed his hat back on his head with care. Then he bent over her and kissed her very quietly — but completely and with authority — to silence her fears. "It's okay, honey," he said. "It's okay now."

"Is, is he g-gone? Did you get rid of the lamp? Did you get someone to buy it from

y-y-you?" Her face was still the moon, but the whiteness of it was slowly passing as his calm flowed to her.

"No questions now, baby," he said softly. "I've got the okay to take you out of here, signed the release forms and everything already. Come on, car's waiting."

He helped her up, and she stared at him oddly. "Car? Whose car? Oh, Danny, don't tell me you borrowed someone's car to come out here and get me. You *know* you haven't got a license."

He motioned her to silence, and leaned against the wall, coolly smoking as she got dressed. When she had run a comb through her thick hair, he took her arm and led her down the hall, and toward the front door. She pressed close to him, and their love was new and strong; her face touched his shoulder and she looked up at him. "Is that a new suit? It's so soft and smooth."

"Egyptian cotton, shantung," he explained, paying it no more attention. She ogled the suit with its obvious expensive tailoring and thread, but said nothing.

Outside, the Cadillac convertible waited, motor running, while the liveried chauffeur leaped out and opened the door for them. They got in

the back seat, and Danny said, "To the house, Mark." The chauffeur nodded briskly, trotted around and climbed behind the wheel. They took off to the muted roar of twin mufflers.

"Oh, I was worried, Danny. I see you hired one of those limousines. Can we afford it?"

Danny did not answer, but merely smiled, and snuggled her closer to him. They rode in silence, and only occasionally did Connie wonder about "the house," and Mark, and the car, and the suit. It was too pleasant to question.

Twenty minutes later they turned into one of the most expensive suburban sections, and sped down a private road.

"But Danny," Connie objected, looking worried, "we live all the way back the other way; in town."

"Not any more we don't," Danny corrected her.

They drove up the private road another three hundred yards, and pulled into a winding driveway. Five hundred yards further, and the drive spiraled in to wind around the front of a huge, luxurious, completely tasteful Victorian mansion. "Go on," Danny commanded. "Look at your house."

Connie was speechless.

"What do you think of it?" Danny asked.

"But who lives here?" Connie asked breathlessly.

"We do," he answered.

The car pulled up before the house, and a doorman ran down to open the car door for them. They got out and the doorman bowed low to Connie. In consternation she bowed back, and Danny could not stifle his good-humored laugh. "Take the car to the garage, Mark," Danny said to the driver. "We won't be needing it again this afternoon. But have the Porsche fueled and ready, we may drive out later this afternoon to look at the grounds."

"Very good, Mr. Squires," Mark snapped, and drove away.

Connie was speechless again. She allowed herself to be led into the house, and saw the expensive fittings, the magnificent halls, the deep-piled rugs, the expensive furniture, the television sets set into the wall, the bar that came out of the wall at the touch of a button, the servants that bowed and scraped to her husband. She boggled at the huge kitchen that was fitted with every latest appliance, and the French chef who saluted with a huge ladle as Danny entered.

"W-where did all this *come* from?" she finally gasped, as he led her upstairs by the escalator.

"The genii," Danny answered politely, hardly restraining the look of triumph that crossed his face.

"The genii?" she repeated incredulously. "But he was stuck in the lamp. Bad-tempered and unhappy because he was wedged inside. How did you—"

She cut off when she saw the nine foot tall black man who stood before the trophy room, naked but for a gold-thread breechclout wrapped about his body, and a turban of like material wound high and tight about his head. He smiled down at them benevolently.

"Welcome home, Mrs. Squires," he said, his huge voice rolling out with friendliness and eagerness to please.

It was the same voice that had been vaulting in laughter as locusts flew in the air, the last time she had heard it. This was the genii.

"But . . . but . . ." she stammered.

Danny laughed, and reservedly (watching that he did not offend his mighty master) the genii joined in, his great, oiled muscles rippling with the effort.

"You were in the lamp,"

she mumbled. "You gave Danny all this . . . but you said you would give him nothing! Why?"

"He freed me, Mistress. After untold ages in my cramped, miserable dungeon, he freed me. I gave him all he wanted, and wait on his every whim."

"But how?" she gibbered. "How did you do it, Danny?"

Danny put his arm around her shoulder, and led her into the trophy room. "Modern man is a clever creature, honey," he pointed out. "It was simple. I used my head—and the tools of modern man. See . . ."

He pointed to the lone trophy in the room.

At first she could not make out what it was. She walked across the mink carpet and peered at it, encased in a block of sheer topaz, set on a gold pedestal. Then, when its form became clear through the green stone, she began to laugh. At first with restraint, and then, as Danny and the genii joined in, with wild abandon. It had been so simple. So completely, ridiculously simple. If only someone had thought of it sooner.

She laughed for a very long time.

Staring at the can opener.

THE END

Frankie was ready for the big test—Ten-Time Winner of the world title. He was young and fit and able; also, he had Milt's cunning brain to direct every feint and punch. This left only one thing in doubt, the—

VITAL INGREDIENT

By GERALD VANCE

CHAMP, what's with ya lately?" Benny asked the question as they lay on the beach.

"Nothing," Frankie answered. "Just fight-nite mysteries, I guess."

"No it ain't, Frankie. It's something else. You losin' confidence in Milt? That it? Can't you hold it one more time? You guys only need tonite and you got it. One more to make Ten-Time Defenders — The first in the game, Frankie."

"We won the last two on points, Benny. Points—and I'm better than that. I keep waiting, and waiting, for my heels to set; for Milt to send it up my legs and back and let fly. But he won't do it, Benny."

"Look, Champ, Milt knows what he's doing. He's sending

you right. You think maybe you know as much as Milt?"

"Maybe I just do, Benny. Maybe I do."

Benny didn't have the answer to this heresy. By law this was Frankie's last fight —as a fighter. If he won this one and became a Ten-Time Defender he would have his pick of the youngsters at the Boxing College just as Milt had chosen him fifteen years before. For fifteen years he'd never thrown a punch of his own in a fight ring.

Maybe because it was his last fight in the ring he felt the way he did today. He understood, of course, why fighters were mentally controlled by proved veterans. By the time a fighter had any real experience and know-how in the old days, his body was

shot. Now the best bodies and the best brains were teamed by mental control.

Benny had an answer now. "Champ, I think it's a good thing this is your last fight. You know too much. After this one you'll have a good strong boy of your own and you can try some of this stuff you've been learning. Milt knows you're no kid anymore. That's why he has to be careful with you."

"I still have it, Benny. My speed, my punch, my timing—all good. There were a dozen times in those last two fights I could have crossed a right and gone home early."

"Two times, Frankie. Just two times. And them late in the fight. Milt didn't think you had it, and I don't think you did either."

Milt, Frankie's master control, came down to the beach and strolled over to join them. Milt had been a five time Defender in the Welter division before his fights ran out. Now he was skinny and sixty. His was the mind that had directed every punch Frankie had ever thrown.

He studied the figure of Frankie lying on the sand. The two-hundred-pound fighting machine was thirty years old. Milt winced when he

compared it to that of the twenty-two year old slugger they would have to meet in a few hours.

Benny said "Hi," and ambled off.

"Well, boy, this one means a lot to both of us," Milt said.

"Sure," was all Frankie could answer.

"For you, the first Ten-Time Defender the heavyweight division has ever produced. For me, The Hall of Boxing Fame."

"You want that pretty bad, don't you, Milt?"

"Yeah, I guess I do, Frankie, but not bad enough to win it the wrong way."

Frankie's head jerked up. "What do you mean, the wrong way?"

Milt scowled and looked as though he wished he hadn't said that. He turned his head and stared hard at his fighter. "There's something we maybe ought to have talked about, Frankie."

"What's that?"

Milt struggled for words. "It's just—oh, hell! Forget it. Just forget I said anything."

"You figure we win tonight?"

"I think maybe we will."

"You don't seem very sure. On points, huh?"

"Yeah, maybe on points."

Milt turned his eyes back on

Frankie's eager face. "Frankie, boy—there's something about being a Ten-Time Defender that's, well—different."

Milt took a deep breath and was evidently ready to tell Frankie exactly what he meant. But Frankie broke in, his voice low and tense. "Milt—"

"Yes?"

"When I get in there tonight—turn me loose!"

Milt was startled at the words. "Release control?"

"Yeah—sure. I think I can take Nappy Gordon on my own!"

"Nappy can stick his fist through a brick wall—all night long. And Pop Monroe knows all there is to know and some he makes up himself. They'd be a tough pair to beat. Our big ace is that they have to beat us. We *got* the Nine-Times."

"I can take him Milt!"

There was a strange light in Milt's eyes. He did not speak and Frankie went on. "Just one round, Milt! If I slip you can grab control again."

"You just want a try at it, huh?"

There seemed to be disappointment in Milt's voice; something Frankie couldn't understand. Milt seemed sud-

denly nervous, ill-at-ease. But Frankie was too eager to give it much attention. "How about it, Milt—huh?"

Milt had been squatting on the sand. He got to his feet and looked out across the water. "All right. Maybe we'll try it."

He seemed sad as he walked away. Frankie, occupied with his own elation, didn't notice . . .

In the studio dressing room, a few hours later Milt and Frankie were warming up. Frankie in the practice ring and Milt perched on a high chair just outside the ropes.

Everything was just as it would be in the fight. Three minutes work, one minute rest. Frankie noticed how slowly and carefully, Milt was working him, and how he watched the clock.

Frankie had nothing to do now but watch, as a spectator would; watch as Milt moved him around, Milt could control every muscle, every move and every reflex of his body. It had taken them five years to perfect this routine. That was the training period at the College of Boxing, and was prescribed by law.

In their first fight they had been at their peak. Frankie

was Milt's second boy and Milt knew boxing as only a Champion Welter with thirty years of experience could know it. For fifteen years he had watched and studied while a good veteran had directed his body. And for another fifteen years he had been the guiding brain to a fine Middleweight.

As a Welterweight, Milt had learned to depend on speed and quick hands. In Frankie he had found the dream of every Welter—a punch. Frankie's body could really deliver the power. At first it had been the heavy hitting that had won the fights lately. Milt had relied more and more on the speed and deception he had developed in Frankie.

Frankie felt the control ease out and knew the warm-up was over. He slipped on his robe and he and Milt went to join the others in the TV studio.

There would be no crowd. Just the cameras, the crews and officials. The fight would be televised in 3-D and filmed in slow motion. If a decision were needed to determine the winner it would be given only after a careful study had been made of the films.

There was little to be done

in the studio and Milt had timed Frankie's warm-up right to the minute. The fighters and their controllers took their positions. The controllers seated in high chairs on opposite sides of the ring. The fighters in opposite corners.

As the warning buzzer sounded, Frankie felt Milt take control. This one he would watch closely.

At the bell Frankie rose and moved out slowly. He noticed how relaxed, almost limp Milt was keeping him. There was only a little more effort used than in the pre-fight warm-up. His left hand had extra speed but only enough power to command respect. The pattern was just about as he had expected. As the fight went along the left would add up the points. But his thoughts were centered on a single question. *How is it going to be on my own?*

In the early rounds he was amazed at the extreme caution Milt was employing. Nappy Gordon's face was beginning to redden from the continual massage of Frankie's brisk left and occasional right. But Frankie felt that his own face must be getting flushed with eagerness. The glory of going in and trying to do it by himself; of beating Pop Monroe without

Milt's help. He wondered if Milt would have to clamp on the controls again. He sure hoped not. But there wasn't anything to really worry about. Milt could beat Pop Monroe and he wouldn't let Frankie take a beating by himself.

Frankie's attention was caught by some odd thoughts in Milt's mind. Milt didn't seem to be sending them, yet they were clear and direct: *You really think you've got it, boy? That vital ingredient?*

What you talking about?

Huh? Me? Oh, nothing. Take it eas_y. But Milt's thoughts were troubled.

When you going to let me go?

I said, take it easy. We'll see.

The sixth round came and Frankie felt no weariness. Milt was working him like he was made of fragile glass. Nor was Nappy tiring so far as he could notice. Pop Monroe was trying for just one solid blow to slow down the Champ. So far nothing even jarring had come close to landing.

In the seventh Frankie noticed a little desperation in Monroe's tactics. To win now Monroe and Gordon needed a knockout. Frankie had only to

stay on his feet to be home safe. But when was Milt going to let him go? Milt had turned in a masterpiece of defensive fighting. The left had deadly accuracy and now the openings were truck-sized as Monroe had come to ignore the light tattoo of the Champ's punches.

Milt withdrew the control in the middle of the seventh round. It hit Frankie like a dash of cold water, the exultation of being on his own! He looked over at Milt, perched rope-high in his control chair at ringside. Milt was looking at him, his face tight and grim; almost hostile.

Frankie circled warily, a touch of panic coming unbidden. What to do? He hadn't known it would be quite like this. He tried to remember how it was—how it felt to move in the various ways Milt always sent him. Funny how you could forget such things. The left hook—that jab—how did they go?

A pile driver came from somewhere and almost tore his head off his shoulders . . .

He was looking up at the ceiling. He rolled his eyes and saw Pop Monroe's face—smiling a little, but also puzzled. Even with his brain groggy, Frankie knew why. He'd stepped wide open in

Nappy's looping right and Pop couldn't figure Milt doing a thing like that.

Pop looked over at Milt. Frankie followed Pop's eyes and saw the look Milt returned. Then the spark of understanding that passed between them. Odd, Frankie thought. What understanding could there be?

He was aware of the word seven filling the studio as the loud speaker blared the count. He was up at nine.

Nappy swarmed in now. Frankie felt the pain of hard solid blows on his body as he tried to tie up this dynamo Poppy Monroe was releasing on him. He couldn't stop it, dodge it, or hide from it.

But he finally got away from it—staggering. Nappy came at him fast and the left jab Frankie sent out to put him off balance didn't even slow the fury a bit. Frankie took to the ropes to make Nappy shorten his punches. It helped some, but not enough. No man could take the jolting effect of those ripping punches and keep his feet under him. Frankie didn't—he was down when the bell ended round nine.

In his corner the seconds worked quickly. He looked at Milt and saw a dead-pan ex-

pression. Milt wasn't sending him anything. Punishing him of course. Frankie took it meekly; ashamed of himself. Milt would take over again when the bell sounded. Frankie knew that he couldn't stay away from Nappy for another round. Nobody could. Monroe smelled a knockout and Frankie was never fast enough to run away from the burst of viciousness that would come at him in the form of Nappy Gordon. No. Milt would take over.

At the bell, Frankie moved out fast, waiting for the familiar feel of Milt expertly manipulating his arms and legs and body; sending out the jabs and punches; weaving him in and out.

But Milt didn't take over and Pop sent Nappy in with a pile-driver right that smashed Frankie to the floor. Frankie rolled over on his knees and shook his head groggily, trying to understand. Why hadn't Milt taken over? What was Milt trying to do to him?

Milt's cold face waved into focus before Frankie's blinking eyes. *What was Milt trying to do?* Frankie heard the tolling count—six, seven, eight. Milt wasn't even going to help him up. Sick and bewildered, Frankie struggled

to his feet. Nappy came driving in. Frankie back-pedalled and took the vicious right cross while rolling away. Thus he avoided being knocked out and was only floored for another eight-count.

Milt — Milt — for God's sake—

The round was over. Frankie staggered, sick, to his corner and slumped down. The handlers worked over him. He looked at Milt. But Milt neither sent nor returned his gaze. Milt sat looking grimly off into space and seemed older and wearier than time itself.

Then Frankie knew. Milt had sold him out!

The shocking truth stunned him even more than Nappy's punches. Milt had sold him out! There had been rare cases of such things. When money meant more than honor to a veteran. But Milt!

Numb, Frankie pondered the ghastly thought. After all, Milt was old. Old men needed money for their later years. But how could he? How could he do it?

Suddenly Frankie hated. He hated Nappy and Pop and every one of the millions of people looking silently on around the world. But most of all, he hated Milt. It was a weird, sickening thing, that

hatred. But only a mentally sickening thing. Physically, it seemed to make Frankie stronger, because when the bell rang and he got up and walked into a straight right, it didn't hurt at all.

He realized he was on the floor; the gong was sounding; he was getting up, moving in again. There was blood, a ringing in his head.

But above all, a rage to kill. To kill.

He remembered going down several times and getting up. Not caring how he had swung under Milt's control—only wanting to use his fists—to kill the thing weaving in front of him.

Nappy. A grinning, weaving, lethal ghost.

He felt a pain in his right fist and saw Nappy go down. He saw Pop's face go gray as though the old man himself had felt the force of the blow. Saw Nappy climb erect slowly. He grinned through blood. Frankie—ghost-catcher. He had to get him.

He was happy; happy with a new fierceness he had never before known. The lust of battle was strong within him and when Pop weaved Nappy desperately, Frankie laughed, waited, measured Nappy.

And smashed him down

with a single jarring right.

The bell tolled ten. Pop got wearily off his stool and walked away. Frankie strode grimly to his corner, ignored Milt, moved on into the dressing room.

He knew Milt would come and he waited for him, sitting there coldly on the edge of the table. Milt walked in the door and stood quietly.

"You sold me out," Frankie said.

There was open pride in Milt's eyes. "Sure—you had to think that."

"What do you mean, think? You didn't pick me up when Pop flattened me. I saw the look between you and Pop."

"Sure." Milt's eyes were still proud. "You had to know. That's how I wanted it."

"Milt—why did you do it?"

"I didn't do it. I just had to make you think I did."

"In God's name—why?"

"Because I'm sentimental, maybe, but I've always had my own ideas about the kind of fighter who should be a Ten-Time winner. All my life I've kept remembering the old greats — Dempsey, Sullivan, Corbett—the men who did it on their own, and I wanted you to get it right—on your own—like a real champion."

Frankie was confused. "I wanted to go on my own. Why

didn't you tell me then?"

"Then you'd have lost. You'd have gone down whimpering and moaning. You see, Frankie, all those old fighters had a vital ingredient—the thing it takes to make a champion—courage."

"And you didn't think I had it?"

"Sure I did. But the killer instinct is dead in fighters today and it has to be ignited. It needs a trigger, so that was what I gave you—a trigger."

Frankie understood, "You wanted me to get mad!"

"To do it, you had to get mad—at me. You're not conditioned to get mad at Nappy or Pop. It's not the way we fight now. It had to be me. I had to make you hate me."

Frankie marveled. "So when Pop looked at you—"

"He knew."

Frankie was off the table, his arms around Milt. "I'm—I'm so ashamed."

Milt grinned. "No, you're not. You're happier than you ever were in your life. You're a real champion. Great feeling, isn't it? Now you know how *they* felt—in the old days."

Frankie was crying. "You are damn right! Thanks."

Milt looked years younger. "Don't mention it—champ."

THE END



SNAKE PIT

By LAWRENCE KINGERY

ILLUSTRATOR SCHROEDER

After finishing this manuscript, one of our readers looked up, with a stunned expression and said, "It's like a bucket of ice water right in your face." We can't put it any better.

BIG Andy laughed down at me from the ledge twenty-five feet above the pit of writhing rattlesnakes. He had thrown his sheepskin jacket wide and his red face and bloodshot eyes shone through the smoke rising from the fired leaves in the bottom of the pit.

"Look at 'em," he roared, swinging his oaken cudgel around his head. "Look at those swarming sons of Satan. Must be fifty of the sleepy fat vipers."

"Watch out," I yelled up at him.

"Whassat, whassat?" he roared. "I ain't scared—"

"There," I shouted hoarsely, "To your right, Andy."

"Where?" He twisted awkwardly on the narrow ledge.

"Higher, Andy. You move to the left. There's one sliding out of the rocks right there."

Andy's alcohol-fogged eyes blinked in the smoke. "I don't see nothing."

"His head, for God's sake. Right there by your shoulder."

With horror, I watched the pitted, fluke-shaped head of the huge rattler sliding like brown oil out of the crevice not six inches from Andy's drunken hulk. The adroit neck swung and then I heard the deadly whir of its rattles. The rattler is excellently camouflaged. You can be looking right at one and not see it unless it moves. Sometimes when it warns you with a rattle, you still have trouble spotting it under the best of conditions. Up there in the smoke, Andy couldn't seem to see this one. But then he heard it. And then he saw it and his mouth stayed

open in a frozen laugh while his eyes bulged with hate and a spurt of reflexive terror.

A harsh bellow came out of Andy's thick neck. He was a huge man, weighing over two hundred pounds, and he swung his oaken cudgel with enough force to brain a bull. The fat, arm-thick coils of the snake flopped out of the crevice, its smashed head wagging. Andy roared obscene oaths at it and stomped at it with his hob-nailed boot.

He got his cudgel under the twitching coils and swung around, hurling it writhing into the smoke. Then with a sickening suck of horror in my gut, I saw him lose his balance, teeter wildly on the edge of the ledge, clutch at the wall of rock, the rocks crumbling, his arms windmilling.

Then I saw his flailing bulk crash down through the smoke.

I heard the scream of paralyzed horror rip from my lips. I saw his body hit flat on its back with a shuddering thud. I heard the awful squashing sound of writhing bodies crushed under his weight.

"Roy," I heard him yelling in terrified agony. "Oh, God, Roy."

I saw him trying to move down there in the rock-bound

pit ten feet deep. His arms threshed to either side and I watched the wide jaws gaping. A chorus of deadly excited rattles whirred. Forty or fifty rattlers were no longer sleepy and Andy was surrounded by a cauldron of them down there.

I broke out of frozen fright and leaned over the edge of the pit. "Andy—get up. Don't try to crawl out. Into the cave. Get into the cave, Andy."

He threshed and wriggled down there like a huge grotesque baby in a crib.

"I can't. My back," he shrieked. "Roy—something's wrong. My back—I can't—"

I started down into the pit. The rustling scales below me filled me with a sick fear as though they were crawling over raw exposed nerves. The scent of reptilian death rose up around me with the smoke and I could feel my entrails drawing in and a rebellious instinctive terror squeezing my throat.

It had been a fresh warm spring morning in New England. Saturday had been winter. Sunday was the first day of March and not only was it spring officially but the sun came out so warm that you knew it would turn hot by noon.

Andy had asked me if I

would go hunt rattlers with him the first warm day of spring, and I had said I would rather not. But then his wife called and said no one else would go with Andy either, and would I please go.

"You know Andy," she said. "He always has to go hunt snakes come spring. People ought to let them things alone way up there, Roy. They don't ever hurt nobody unless you rile them up. But Andy's just got to do it. You've got to go up there with him, Roy. You know how he is."

"All right, Martha," I said. She was very grateful, and Andy came by for me in his pick-up truck and we drove up the muddy road, turned at the fork and went up the slushed hill road through the second-growth timber, and on up toward the ridge.

Sure, I knew Andy. A child-like brain in a giant's body. The town clown too big and dangerous for anyone to play jokes with. He worked at a sawmill and among other childish activities in his spare time, he went up to the ridge every spring to kill rattlers, and milk juice from their poisonous fangs.

The way he drove, the way he laughed, and the red face told me that Andy was already loaded and it wasn't ten in the

morning yet. Every weekend Andy got roaring drunk and raised a lot of laughing hell around the village. He was always threatening to hurt somebody but he never did. He was really a sort of timid type, for all his great size. And he seemed to take all his hostility out on the snakes.

"We're sure gonna get a sackful of them big vipers this morning, Roy," he said.

"I forgot to bring a sack," I said.

"I didn't forget. I got two gunny-sacks back there. You think they'll be a lot of them coming out today, Roy?"

"I can't say that I'm hopeful about it," I said.

"It's going to be warm. Lot of them'll be coming out up there on that ridge, Roy. Listen, I'm glad you changed your mind and came along. We're sure going to get a sackful of them old granddaddies. I brought the kit along for you, Roy. Hell, I don't need it. They ain't never bit me and they ain't going to."

I checked the kit. It had a couple of patent rubber ligatures in it, a cased scalpel, a hypodermic syringe, a pint bottle of whiskey, almost gone, and a bottle containing a chloride of lime solution.

"I got it from Old Man Hall over at the drug store," Andy

said. "Figured you'd have a little more fun if you had a kit in your pocket."

"Thanks," I said.

He had also brought along two oak bludgeons, forked sticks, leather gauntlets, and both of us wore hobnailed boots that laced to the knees.

We drove through the leafless forsythia about to break in sprays of yellow blossoms. It sure seemed to be spring early all right. Snowdrops were opening everywhere. Purple crocuses were out. We drove on up through spots of hemlock and pine and Andy parked under the sharp cliffs, gray and brown rock jutting out in split sections and below them a jumble of big glacial rocks.

Andy gave me one of the oaken clubs, took one for himself, and the forked sticks, and we started up toward the ridge.

"I ain't scared of snake bites," Andy said, and he threw his head back and laughed wildly. "Best remedy for snake bite anyway is good old corn whiskey. And since last night I got enough in me I could be bit by a damn sea serpent and not feel nothin'."

We worked back and forth through the rocks for several

hours without spotting a single snake. Andy would stop once in a while and take a long pull on the bottle. He got more careless as we worked up toward the ridge. He began blowing heavily. His face turned sweaty and beet red. He blundered crazily through the rocks, banging his oaken cudgel on the broken stone shelves, tearing at blotches of lichen, kicking savagely into the damp shades of moss and the low huckleberry bushes growing from drifts of old chestnut burrs and leaves. He pushed on fiercely.

"Ah, Roy," he finally said. "Reckon maybe they ain't coming out?"

"Could be," I said. "We can go on up toward the ridge. Sun's hotter up there."

"Maybe they ain't woke up yet, Roy."

"From what little I know about them," I said, "these warm spells sure fool those snakes. They think it's summer and they come out. That's what you said, isn't it?"

"Yeah, sure, that's the way it is, Roy. Always has been that way. Warm spell fools 'em. They always come out too early, and that's when I like to start clobbering away at them. They're stiff and not warmed up. They can't move fast. Why, Roy, last March I

smashed the heads of thirty-six of 'em before I stopped."

I stopped when I saw the movement and then I pointed.

"There's a pit there," Andy said, "and a cave. Bats in that cave, and last year I figured there'd be snakes in it. Wasn't one solitary snake."

He pulled his way through brush and over the rocks, and then he let out a wild yell and jumped up and down like a kid. "Roy, Roy, there's a thousand of 'em in the pit here. They're comin' out of the cave."

It was an extraordinarily hot day for March. The rocks were very warm. And when I looked into the pit, I could see that the snakes were far from stiff with the winter's cold.

"They're spry, Roy. Look how spry they are."

I was looking. I could smell the musty reeking odor. I could see the swarming coiling mass of poisonous rattlers down there. There were all sizes, all intertwining and coiling and uncoiling and lying out in the sun, soaking up the warmth.

"They ain't got no sense," Andy yelled. "They always think it's spring."

In the back of the pit, entering into the cliff, I could see the black chilled recesses of the cave.

My stomach turned over as

Andy prepared to jump into the pit. I grabbed his arm. "Don't be a damn fool," I yelled.

"Yeah," he mumbled disgustedly. "There's too many of them all coiled up down there in one place. I could trample a lot of them and club a lot more, but there's too many."

Then he blundered up above the pit onto the ridge. He pulled out his cigarette lighter. He swung his cudgel around wildly and roared with laughter, finished the bottle and dropped it into the pit where it exploded in a shower of glass. The snakes raised their evil heads, rattles sounded a warning, and bright eyes looked at me, and at Andy. Andy had told me once that they can't see so well. They react to heat. But I felt their eyes boring into me.

He put the club on the ledge, unscrewed the cap on the lighter with a dime, and poured lighter fluid out onto a big bandanna handkerchief. He lit the handkerchief and dropped the blazing rag into the pile of dried brush and leaves below him. Immediately it flared up, leaves and brush sending up tongues of flame and streams of gray smoke. The fire and smoke blocked off the cave. The flames spread out through the rocks. The snakes hissed and quivered in the growing

heat, coiling, sliding away from the intense center of the flames.

"Burn, burn, you sons of Satan," Andy roared. He grabbed up the club and swung it around his head. "They'll wiggle up, right up out of the pit, Roy. Get ready. Get the sacks, Roy."

I could hear the wild agonized hissing and rattling in the pit, and see the reptiles writhing toward the cooler rock walls. They were scattering, sliding away frantic, some of them still stiff and slow with winter's cold, but all of them limbering up fast as the heat ate into them.

And then that rattler came out of the rocks up there, and I yelled at Andy and he got the snake all right, but then he was on his back down in that pit of hell, his legs paralyzed, and his voice rising to a terrible scream.

"My back," he shrieked. "Roy—something's wrong. My back—I can't—"

By then I had climbed to the bottom of the pit. Smoke burned into my eyes and throat. I was coughing, wiping at my eyes. The wind shifted and I could see Andy. I was kicking with my boots, beating desperately with the oaken bludgeon. A violent spasm sickness hit

me as I saw Andy, feebly writhing, his mouth gaping and slobbering with pain and terror.

I could hear the thudding impact as they struck Andy. I don't know how many of them there were crawling over him, coiled around him, hissing, striking with blurred speed too fast for the eye to follow. The blunt, arrow-shaped heads plunged in, back, in again. Fangs sank into his face, neck, into his arms, legs, torso. He flailed with one arm and to my horror I saw the fangs of two huge rattlers big around as my arm still clinging to his flesh.

I kicked and smashed with the club, working my way across the pit, knowing I was too late. Enough poison was in Andy's blood to kill ten men. I stomped, kicked, beating their bloated bodies and striking heads into the rocks.

I reached him, and he seemed to see me in the smoke. His body plunged up from the waist, pushed by a supreme effort of will. His head was back. The ropes of his neck stood out as though they would burst. And the most pitiable and terrible cry burst from his mouth I have ever heard. I never want to hear anything like it again.

I kicked and stomped with

my heavy hob-nails, and laid about with an insane kind of fury and fear. I got hold of his foot, dragged his body a few feet toward the cave mouth. His face was already a sicken-ing red wattled mass of punctures and bloat, his eyes swollen shut, his lips parted in a horrible grin that I knew was the grin of a dead man. I could see the thick yellowish poison of countless bites flowing down his face, dripping onto his chest. His arms, neck, bared chest, face, were pin-cushioned with dark punctures flowing poison.

I felt the icy draft of stored winter air coming out of the cave. I dropped his boot and stumbled back. My heel caught and I fell backward. The snake was only two feet away. It was as big as the calf of my leg and over four feet long. It was not coiled. It had to pounce, instead of strike. And as it lunged, its mouth opened fantasti-cally wide, unhinging, drip-ping white. I tried to roll and I felt the terrific impact of his bludgeon-like head in my arm. Pain and hate twisted me around. I got my right hand around its neck. Its coils whip-ped around my arm, and its rattles whirred in my face. I tore the head from its hold in my flesh, seeing the yellow

poisonous juice fly in the air. I caught the frothing body, twisted it belly up and snapped the spine backward.

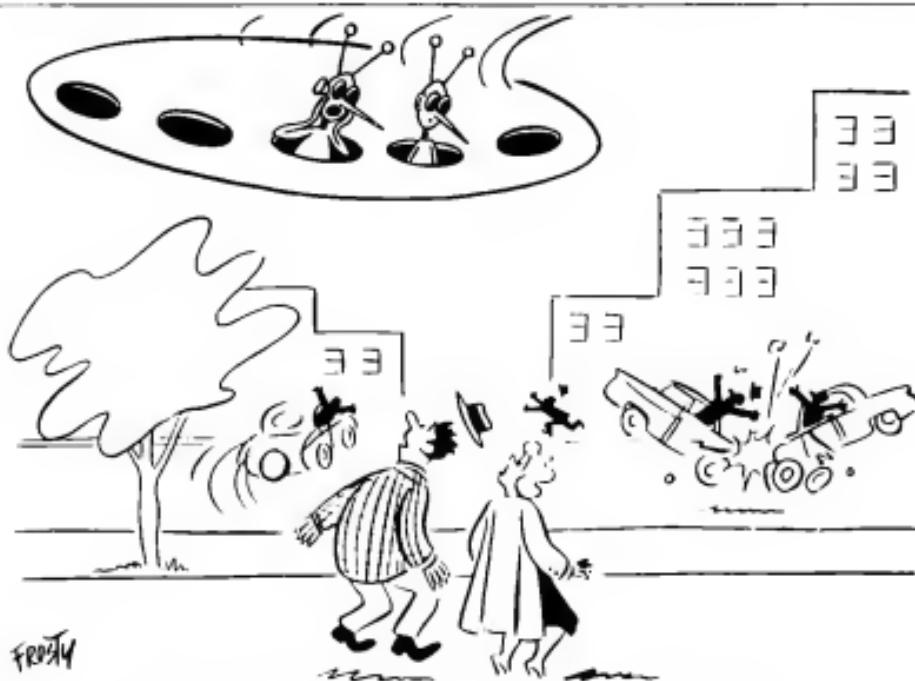
I slid backward into the cold darkness of the cave, and kept on going. I went back into the cave until I could barely see and what I saw were dozens of rattlers coiled together like mounds of monstrous worms. Only these were still lethargic, still in their winter's sleep. They stirred only slightly and didn't bother me. But if they felt my warmth they would respond to it. I crawled up on a ledge.

I took the syringe out. Then I opened my pocket knife. A

numbing wooden feeling was creeping up toward my eyes. An awful sickness spasmed in my belly and I felt the warm flow of vomit but I went on, slashing at the bite. I thrust the bloody wound into my mouth and sucked and spat and sucked and spat and vomited. Then I shot in several syringes of chloride and applied ligatures.

Then I passed out. They didn't find me until late that night. I was nearer dead than alive and they had to amputate the lower part of my arm.

Which is a thing Andy won't have to worry about come next spring. **THE END**



"Run for your lives. The Venusians are landing!"

GREAT SCIENCE FICTION



JAMES H. SCHMITZ

LEFT HAND, RIGHT HAND

ROBERT SILVERBERG

FORGOTTEN WORLD

STEPHEN BARTHOLOMEW

FAR ENOUGH TO TOUCH

JACK DOUGLAS

DEAD WORLD

O.H. LESLIE

INHERITANCE

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MAGIC WINDOW

ELLIS HART

POT-LUCK GENII

GERALD VANCE

VITAL INGREDIENT

LAWRENCE KINGERY

SNAKE PIT



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